

In the late 1960's Daniel Greenberg an American physicist was looking for a child friendly school near Boston for his own children. He couldn't find one. So, a few like minded parents got together and started The Sudbury Valley School.

This book is simply written, shorn of all educational jargon. It recounts the inspiring story of this marvelous school where children can "just be". There is no curriculum, no classes, no grades, no coercion, no uniforms, no bells and none of the rituals which define a regular school.

Here children are treated as responsible citizens and they carry the burden of their own education. Unless asked, the teachers "stay away" from the children. Here children discover their own innate interests and then gallantly pursue them. And because they chose them, they also rough it out and learn them well. So, children become the true architects of their own education.

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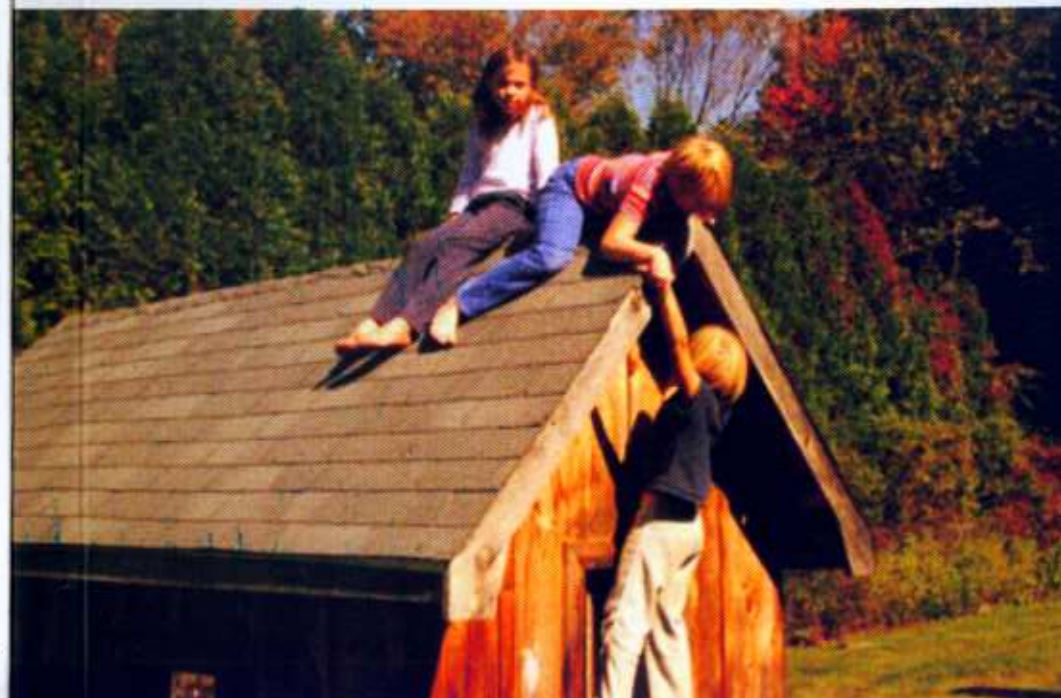
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# Free at Last

*The Sudbury Valley School*



Daniel Greenberg



Free at Last  
The Sudbury Valley School

Daniel Greenberg

BANYAN TREE

# Free at Last

*The Sudbury Valley School*

by

Daniel Greenberg

*Photographs by Michael Greenberg,  
Andrew Brilliant Carol Palmer and . . .*



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## FREE AT LAST

The Sudbury Valley School

Daniel Greenberg

First Published in India 2012

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To Hanna

together we have been as one person  
weaving dreams into realities

1862

"What is meant by non-interference of the school in learning? . . . [It means] granting students the full freedom to avail themselves of teaching that answers their needs, and that they want, only to the extent that they need and want it ; and it means not forcing them to learn what they do not need or want....

"I doubt whether [the kind of school I am discussing] will become common for another century. It is not likely . . . that school based on students freedom of choice will be established even a hundred years from now."

Count Leo Tolstoy  
"Education and Culture"

1968

"The purpose for which this corporation is formed is to establish and maintain a school for the education of members of the community that is founded upon the principle that learning is best fostered by self motivation, self-regulation and self-criticism . . ."

By-Laws of  
The Sudbury Valley School



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## Introduction

Every thinking educator has grappled with the basic questions that have dogged the profession from earliest times: What is the best way to teach, or to learn? What subjects should children learn? How responsible are children? How much of a say should they have in what they do? How should schools be run in a democratic society? For most of us these questions must remain theoretical. We inherit an education system and we cannot play out our fantasies in the real world. We must preserve the best in what we have, and not tamper lightly with the existing order.

Occasionally a group of people, uninhibited by tradition, asks these questions – and proposes radical new answers, in a "hothouse" setting for all of us to see. Such experiments are especially valuable in providing a completely fresh look at accepted doctrines, and helping us try new ones.

In 1968 a unique experimental school was established in Framingham, Massachusetts. Sudbury Valley School, which is open to students ages 4 to 19, has pioneered a number of highly innovative practices. Its work has gained wide recognition, and it has the distinction of being the first such school ever to

be fully accredited.

One of the most interesting aspects of Sudbury Valley is its attitude toward learning. The school starts from a premise stated by Aristotle over 2000 years ago in his famous opening to the *Metaphysics*: "Human beings are naturally curious." This implies that people learn constantly, as an innate part of living. It means also that children will learn through following their natural inclinations, doing what they want with their time, all day, every day. Regardless of their ages, from the moment students enter the school, they are on their own, forced to take responsibility for themselves and make all the tough decisions that will determine the course of their lives. The school, with its staff, physical plant, equipment and library serves as a resource that is available when asked for, passive when not. The idea is simple: driven by innate curiosity, which is the essence of human nature, children will make enormous exertions to explore and master the world around them.

What actually happens? Everyone learns the basics – but at their own pace, in their own time and their own way. Some children learn to read at age five, others at ten. Some learn best from teachers or other students, others learn best by themselves. On any given day, students of all ages can be seen learning together, talking, playing – growing. As they grow older, they develop a strong sense of identity and set goals for the future. When they leave they go on to a huge variety of activities – professions, trades, businesses, colleges, all over the country. All this takes place in an educational setting where students are the judges of what they should do and how they should progress.

Another of many fascinating innovations is in the organizational structure. The school is governed as a pure democracy, by the School Meeting, in which every student and staff member has one vote. Every aspect of the school operates this way, without exception: rules, budget, administration, hiring

and firing, and discipline. The result is a smoothly run institution in which everyone has a stake, a physical plant virtually free of vandalism and graffiti, and an atmosphere of openness and trust that is unheard of in schools of any size these days. With it all, the school functions without any government or foundation assistance whatsoever, on a tuition that is about half the per pupil expenditure in public schools and far below that of independent private schools.

Perhaps the easiest way to explain the school is to explain what we looked for in an educational institution, and how we set about getting it. Actually, we were after quite a few different things, and we found that all of them fit together into a single, unified whole.

As far as learning and teaching were concerned, we wanted people to be able to learn only what they were eager to learn – what they set out to learn on their own initiative, what they insisted on learning, and what they were ready to work hard at. We wanted them to be entirely free to choose their own materials, and books, and teachers. We felt that the only learning that ever counts in life happens when the learners have thrown themselves into a subject on their own, without coaxing, or bribing, or pressure. And we were sure that teachers working with eager, determined, persistent students would experience unusual satisfaction. In fact, we thought that such an environment would be a paradise for students and teachers alike.

In order to be true to ourselves we had to get away from any notion of a curriculum, or a school-inspired program. We had to let all the drive come from the students, with the school committed only to responding to this drive. The full responsibility for each person's activities had to lie with that person, and not with someone else in a position of authority. This is why we have never had any required studies at any level, ever. We fig-

ured that everyone, with the help they could muster at school, could find out for themselves what was and what wasn't necessary to know in order to get where they wanted in life.

This tied in rather closely with the character traits we were hoping to foster. More than anything, we wanted people to experience the full meaning of responsibility. We wanted them to know what it is to be a responsible person – not just from books, or lectures, or sermons, but from everyday experience.

The way we saw it, responsibility means that you have to carry the ball for yourself. You, and you alone, must make your decisions, and you must live with them. No one should be thinking for you, and no one should be protecting you from the consequences of your actions. This, we felt, is essential if you want to be independent, self-directed, and the master of your own destiny.

Individual responsibility also implies a basic equality among all people. Whatever authority exists must exist by the free consent of all parties. This is nothing new, of course – our country was founded on this principle. To us it was a guide for everyday action.

A lot of concepts are involved in the idea of a responsible individual, and they are all tied up with learning the art of being a free and independent person. The school we had in mind had to be rooted in this idea. We could not be satisfied with anything less than full personal responsibility and accountability for each person, regardless of age, or knowledge, or achievement. We knew that people would make mistakes this way – but they would know that the mistakes they made were their own, and so they would be likelier to learn from them. We felt that healthy people would always find ways to benefit from their failures as well as their successes. We believed it a good thing to let people try whatever they want, whether or not they were sure to succeed, so that they would be mentally prepared to meet an unex-

pected challenge, or seize an unexpected opportunity.

The character traits we wanted to foster would be part of a general atmosphere that we hoped would permeate the school. More than anything, we sought an environment that is open, honest, trustworthy, and free of fear. Our goal was to have a school where no one would be afraid, at least not because of anything we did.

Fear of power and authority was what we wanted to abolish from the school. We were not concerned about people having authority. Authority in and of itself can be good or bad, depending on many things. Some situations need persons in authority – an apprentice learning situation, for example, or a business.

The main question is how people get their authority, and how it is controlled once they get it. You are not afraid of people in a position of power if you understand why they are there, if you had a hand in putting them there, and if you can keep an eye on everything they do. What you are afraid of is arbitrary authority, authority that excludes you from participation, over which you have no control. We were determined that no person in the school, whether student or staff or parent or guest, should have any cause to fear the authority of anyone associated with the school. This more than anything would make it possible for one person to look another straight in the eye regardless of age or sex or position or knowledge or background.

As far as we were concerned, a democratic form of government is the best way people have ever come up with to manage their affairs. It gives everyone the most leeway possible to be independent, and at the same time, in matters that need joint action, it allows each person to have a full share in making decisions. We felt that the kind of popular democracy practiced in New England town meetings for over three hundred years was a

good form of government, hard to beat. The kind of school we had in mind would be organized entirely on the town meeting model. No one would be left out.

We thought that it made good sense for a school to be run democratically in a country where all forms of government are democratic. From the smallest town to the Federal level, all our institutions have been designed to be democratically controlled in one way or another. We asked ourselves why schools shouldn't be run this way too, and the more we thought about it, the more we thought they should be. In a democratic school, the adult members of the community could apply to the school the same standards of citizenship they applied to their outside lives. And the children in the school could be nurtured in the principles and practices that make up the democratic way of life. By the time they became adults, responsible community citizenship would be natural to them, because they would have lived with it for a long time.

When we took stock of all the different things we were after in the school, we found that they all amounted to a core idea, from which everything else followed naturally.

The idea was of a school where people managed their own affairs without any outside interference, and where they managed their joint affairs – the school's business – through a kind of town meeting.

It was as simple as that, and it contained the idea of learning we were after; it fostered the character traits we wished to bring out; it embodied the atmosphere we sought; and it had the structure we desired.

Before the school actually started in 1968, many people said that we were dreamers, that our vision of a school was utopian. But now it has existed for years, for everyone to see.

How does it feel to visit Sudbury Valley? The main building is a stone mansion built over one hundred years ago from locally quarried granite. Around it are ten acres of lawns, trees, shrubs, and flowering bushes. At one end of the campus there is a large barn and stable area, converted for school use. At the other end, facing a millpond, is a granite millhouse, next to an earth and stone dam over which extends an old covered wood bridge. Around the campus as far as the eye can see are hundreds of acres of state park and conservation lands, fields and woods, marshes, and rolling hills, which reflect in their changing colors and foliage the different seasons of the year.

The place doesn't look or feel like a school at all. The standard "school cues" are missing. It looks more like a home, with many persons going about their varied activities in a determined, yet relaxed, manner. The furniture, the people, and the ambience are not what one might expect to find. Visitors often feel baffled; they look for what they are used to seeing in schools, and don't encounter it here.

This book is an attempt to help everybody "see" Sudbury Valley. It provides a wealth of personal experience, gleaned from the first twenty years of the school's life. It is not a treatise on educational philosophy or practice, nor is it a formal history of the school. Rather, it is a human story of an experiment absolutely unique in the annals of education.

The Sudbury Valley School Press





## Foreword for Indian Edition

The school as an institution has been under heavy fire and severely critiqued. *School is Dead* was written by Everett Reimer in the 1960s. *Danger School* – a classic published by Paulo Freire's group in the late 1970's captured through scathing cartoons the harm which schools inflict on our children. Most schools are caged jails where an alien curriculum designed by some "experts" is thrust down the child's gullet. No self-respecting child would ever go to school unless pushed by the parents.

Today schools have facades resembling corporate houses. Many are gargantuan enterprises with thousands of children on their rolls, and for all practical purposes they are run like factories, or better still like mini-armies.

But there have always been libertarian thinkers envisioning "free schools" for children. Count Leo Tolstoy – a Russian anarchist founded a school for the children of poor peasants in Yasnaya Polyana, where he taught himself. This of course, angered the local nobility. Montessori was Italy's first lady medical doctor who worked out the "stages of development" in children. Gijubhai Badheka – a contemporary of Gandhiji was deeply inspired by Montessori's methods. His genius lay in cre-

actively adapting Montessori's methods to the Indian context and enriching them. For over 20 years Gijubhai ran a child-friendly school in his native Bhavnagar, Gujarat. He recounted his educational journey in the classic *Divaswapna* (meaning to "day dream"). This sterling book, first written in 1928, still remains India's most original contribution to pedagogy.

Rabindranath Tagore penned down his educational vision lucidly in the classic tale *The Parrot's Training*. He created a haven in Shantiniketan where students could imbibe the best of the east and the west in a very salubrious natural environment.

Tetsuko Kuroyangi recounted her experiences of Tomoe – a small libertarian school in Japan run by a visionary principal Kobayashi. This school which ran in several old railway compartments has been immortalized in the book *Tottochan* – made available in several Indian languages by the National Book Trust.

Perhaps the most noteworthy Indian experience in free schooling was Neelbagh – a small school started and run by David Horsburgh in the 1970s. Here children from nearby villages – many of them first generation learners learnt the most amazing and astounding things. Apart from being fluent in 4-5 languages they also mastered many worthwhile skills – carpentry, sewing, theatre and poetry. This school demonstrated that ordinary village kids could learn world class stuff in an atmosphere of freedom. The Neelbagh School posed a big challenge to the dreary, run down state schools and became a threat to the authorities. It soon shut down.

Perhaps the longest lasting libertarian school in the world is Summerhill. It was founded in 1921 by A. S. Neill in England with the belief that the school should be made to fit the child, rather than the other way around. It is run as a democratic community; the way the school runs is decided in the school meet-

ing, which anyone, staff or pupil, may attend, and at which everyone has an equal vote. Members of the community are free to do as they please, as long as their actions do not cause any harm to others.

Summerhill believes that children learn best when freed from coercion. So, all lessons are optional, and pupils are free to choose what to do with their time. Neill believed that "the function of a child is to live his own life – not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, not a life according to the purpose of an educator who thinks he knows best."

In the ninety years of its existence just about a thousand students have passed out of Summerhill but it has had the most profound impact on libertarian education worldwide.

The Sudbury Valley School was inspired by Summerhill. In the late 1968's Daniel Greenberg – an American physicist was looking for a child friendly school near Boston for his own children. He couldn't find one. So, a few like minded parents got together and started the Sudbury Valley School. This book is simply written, shorn of all educational jargon. It recounts the inspiring story of this marvelous school where children can "just be". There is no curriculum, no classes, no grades, no coercion, no uniforms, no bells and none of the rituals which define a regular school. Here children are treated as responsible citizens and they carry the burden of their own education. Unless asked, the teachers "stay away" from the children. Here children discover their own innate interests and then gallantly pursue them. And because they chose them, they also rough it out and learn them well. So, children become the true architects of their own education.

The school is also not expensive – the expense per child is about half that of a state run school. The Sudbury Valley School experience has inspired others to start similar schools elsewhere. Today, 30 such schools are spread over eight different countries.

Running a "free progress school" has never been easy. It requires guts to swim against the tide with the mainstream trying its best to tighten its noose and strangulating freedom and creativity. In this harsh terrain some "free schools" run their course and die, but then others are born. There have always been such freaky schools, started by gutsy individuals which have shown the hollowness of mainstream schools. From the margins they have teased and taunted the system and this has often brought about some worthwhile reforms.

Two years back Daniel Greenberg and Mimsy Sadofsky—both founders of the Sudbury Valley School were very kind to give me free permission to translate and publish *Free at Last* in Hindi and Marathi. The Hindi version will soon be published by Eklavya, Bhopal and the Marathi translation by the Garware Bal Bhavan, Pune.

For those visually inclined there is a wonderful 2-hour long film on the Sudbury Valley School. Over the last 40 years many TV channels - BBC, NHK etc have shot over a dozen short films on the school. Someone wove all these films together and uploaded them on a torrent. Each film has a different "take" on the school and in the end you get a reasonably "holistic" picture of the school.

The English version of *Free at Last* will be a "star" addition to the existing literature on child friendly education. I am sure the English edition will certainly inspire other Indian language editions of this book.

Arvind Gupta

## Foreword

# No One Need Apply

There were no appointments available.

By December, everyone who hoped to attend Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, had long since submitted their applications and made arrangements for an admissions interview. December was late to apply, almost certainly too late to see anyone.

That didn't stop Lisa. Every morning, shortly after 9:00, she got on the phone and dialed Wesleyan admissions. Every morning, a secretary took her call and said, "No openings." Soon her voice and her persistence were known to all the admissions people. She chatted with them, cajoled them, implored them. Week after week.

Why hadn't she applied on time, they would ask. She had, was her reply – but not to Wesleyan. Her other applications were long since completed. But only just now had she been told by a friend and teacher that she must look into Wesleyan, the perfect school for her. She had visited the campus, talked to people there, and realized her friend was right.

Wesleyan was for her. She knew it, and no matter how late her application, she was determined to have Wesleyan know it too.

An interview was essential. To get in, they had to evaluate her directly, look her in the eye, see what and who she really is. Of course, she had written the usual essays and answers on the printed form. But in one way her application was frighteningly different.

It had no grades, no transcripts, no written evaluations. None, not one, from all her years at school.

Lisa had gone to Sudbury Valley School. She had learned many things, but most of all she had learned that she had to make it on her own.

January 8th. "We have a cancellation. Can you come next Tuesday at 9:00 AM? The Dean of Admissions himself will see you." Ecstasy. Of course, she can come next Tuesday, any day, any time.

She arrives at the Wesleyan office. Everyone turns to look at her. So this is the girl who never stopped calling, never gave up. They smile at her, welcome her warmly. The Dean knows.

She disappears into the Dean's office for her fifteen minute audience. The other applicants are waiting their turns and their appointed times. A quarter of an hour passes. No Lisa. Half an hour. Three-quarters of an hour. What is going on in there? Finally, after an hour, the Dean emerges with her, both laughing. They go over to her waiting mother, where the Dean says only, "I hope Lisa decides to come. I think this is the right place for her."

The application, the interview, have worked. Twelve years of schooling, distilled into a powerful essence, have achieved what they set out to do. She has been invited to attend. She accepts.

Every graduate of Sudbury Valley who wanted to attend

college has a similar story to tell. All were accepted, most to their college of first choice. Many were invited. None had transcripts or any of the standard evaluations or recommendation forms.

They had more. They had their inner strength, their self-knowledge, their determination. And each time, in every college admissions office where they had applied, people wondered, "What kind of school is this that turns out such people? What is Sudbury Valley?"

This book is the story of a school, unlike any other that ever was. It took the best from a lot of other places, but the net result was something quite different, both ancient and modern, and endlessly intriguing.

This is a peek at a hotbed of rugged individualism, personal freedom, and political democracy – a hotbed of American values, flourishing in an old New England town.



Part I  
L'arnin'



# 1

## And 'Rithmetic

Sitting before me were a dozen boys and girls, aged nine to twelve. A week earlier, they had asked me to teach them arithmetic. They wanted to learn to add, subtract, multiply, divide, and all the rest.

"You don't really want to do this," I said, when they first approached me.

"We do, we are sure we do," was their answer.

"You don't really," I persisted. "Your neighborhood friends, your parents, your relatives probably want you to, but you yourselves would much rather be playing or doing something else."

"We know what we want, and we want to learn arithmetic. Teach us, and we'll prove it. We'll do all the homework, and work as hard as we can."

I had to yield then, skeptically. I knew that arithmetic took six years to teach in regular schools, and I was sure their interest would flag after a few months. But I had no choice.

They had pressed hard, and I was cornered.

I was in for a surprise.

My biggest problem was a textbook to use as a guide. I had been involved in developing the "new math," and I had come to hate it. Back then when we were working on it – young academicians of the Kennedy post-sputnik era – we had few doubts. We were filled with the beauty of abstract logic, set theory, number theory, and all the other exotic games mathematicians had played for millenia. I think that if we had set out to design an agricultural course for working farmers, we would have begun with organic chemistry, genetics, and microbiology. Lucky for the world's hungry people that we weren't asked.

I had come to hate the pretensions and abstruseness of the "new math." Not one in a hundred math teachers knew what it was about, not one in a thousand pupils. People need arithmetic for reckoning; they want to know how to use the tools. That's what my students wanted now.

I found a book in our library, perfectly suited to the job at hand. It was a math primer written in 1898. Small and thick, it was brimming with thousands of exercises, meant to train young minds to perform the basic tasks accurately and swiftly.

Class began – on time. That was part of the deal. "You say you are serious?" I had asked, challenging them; "then I expect to see you in the room on time – 11:00AM sharp, every Tuesday and Thursday. If you are five minutes late, no class. If you blow two classes – no more teaching." "It's a deal," they had said, with a glint of pleasure in their eyes.

Basic addition took two classes. They learned to add everything – long thin columns, short fat columns, long fat columns. They did dozens of exercises. Subtraction took another two classes. It might have taken one, but "borrowing" needed some extra explanation.

On to multiplication, and the tables. Everyone had to memorize the tables. Each person was quizzed again and again in class. Then the rules. Then the practice.

They were high, all of them. Sailing along, mastering all the techniques and algorithms, they could feel the material entering their bones. Hundreds and hundreds of exercises, class quizzes, oral tests, pounded the material into their heads.

Still they continued to come, all of them. They helped each other when they had to, to keep the class moving. The twelve year olds and the nine year olds, the lions and the lambs, sat peacefully together in harmonious cooperation – no teasing, no shame.

Division – long division. Fractions. Decimals. Percentages. Square roots.

They came at 11:00 sharp, stayed half an hour, and left with homework. They came back next time with all the homework done. All of them.

In twenty weeks, after twenty contact hours, they had covered it all. Six years' worth. Every one of them knew the material cold.

We celebrated the end of the classes with a rousing party. It wasn't the first time, and wasn't to be the last, that I was amazed at the success of our own cherished theories. They had worked here, with a vengeance.

Perhaps I should have been prepared for what happened, for what seemed to me to be a miracle. A week after it was all over, I talked to Alan White, who had been an elementary math specialist for years in the public schools and knew all the latest and best pedagogical methods.

I told him the story of my class.

He was not surprised.

"Why not?" I asked, amazed at his response. I was still reeling from the pace and thoroughness with which my "dirty

dozen" had learned.

"Because everyone knows," he answered, "that the subject matter itself isn't that hard. What's hard, virtually impossible, is beating it into the heads of youngsters who hate every step. The only way we have a ghost of a chance is to hammer away at the stuff bit by bit every day for years. Even then it does not work. Most of the sixth graders are mathematical illiterates. Give me a kid who wants to learn the stuff – well, twenty hours or so makes sense."

I guess it does. It's never taken much more than that ever since.

## 2

# Classes

We have to be careful with words. It's a miracle they ever mean the same thing to any two people. Often, they don't. Words like "love," "peace," "trust," "democracy" – everyone brings to these words a lifetime of experiences, a world view, and we know how rarely we have these in common with anyone else.

Take the word "class." I don't know what it means in cultures that don't have schools. Maybe they don't even have the word. To most people reading this, the word conveys a wealth of images: a room with a "teacher" and "students" in it, the students sitting at desks and receiving "instruction" from the teacher, who sits or stands before them. It also conveys much more: a "class period," the fixed time when the class takes place; homework; a textbook, which is the subject matter of the class clearly laid out for all the students.

And it conveys more: boredom, frustration, humiliation, achievement, failure, competition.

At Sudbury Valley the word means something quite different.

At Sudbury Valley, a class is an arrangement between two parties. It starts with someone, or several persons, who decide they want to learn something specific – say, algebra, or French, or physics, or spelling, or pottery. A lot of times, they figure out how to do it on their own. They find a book, or a computer program, or they watch someone else. When that happens, it isn't a class. It's just plain learning.

Then there are the times they can't do it alone. They look for someone to help them, someone who will agree to give them exactly what they want to make the learning happen. When they find that someone, they strike a deal: "We'll do this and that, and you'll do this and that – OK?" If it's OK with all the parties, they have just formed a class.

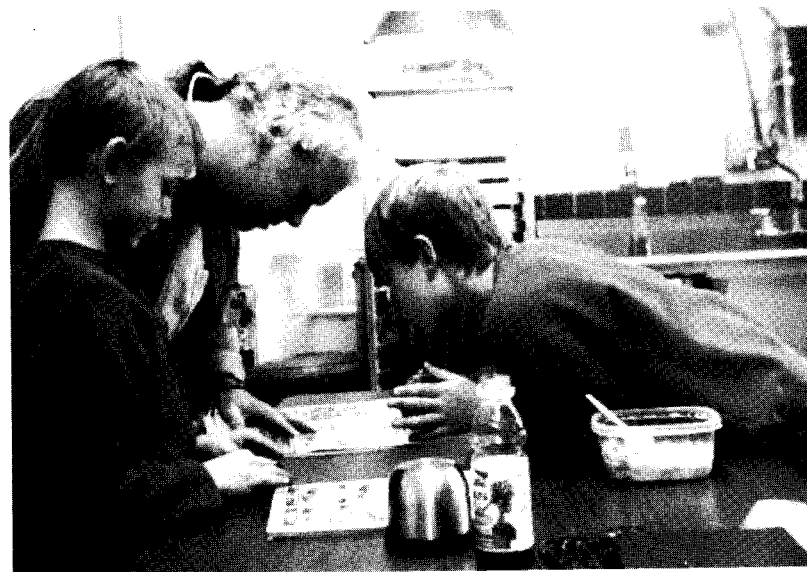
Those who initiate the deal are called "students." If they don't start it up, there is no class. Most of the time, kids at school figure out what they want to learn and how to learn it all on their own. They don't use classes all that much.

The someone who strikes the deal with the students is called a "teacher." Teachers can be other students at the school. Usually, they are people hired to do the job.

Teachers at Sudbury Valley have to be ready to make deals, deals that satisfy the students' needs. We get a lot of people writing the school asking to be hired as teachers. Many of them tell us at length how much they have to "give" to children. People like that don't do too well at the school. What's important to us is what the students want to take, not what the teachers want to give. That's hard for a lot of professional teachers to grasp.

The class deals have all sorts of terms: subject matter, times, obligations of each party. For example, to make the deal, the teacher has to agree to be available to meet the students at certain times. These times may be fixed periods: a half hour every Tuesday at 11:00AM. Or they may be flexible: "whenever

er we have questions, we'll get together on Monday mornings at 10:00AM to work them out. If we have no questions, we'll skip till next week." Sometimes, a book is chosen to serve as a reference point. The students have their end of the deal to meet. They agree to be on time, for instance.



Classes end when either side has had enough of the deal. If the teachers find out they can't deliver, they can back out – and the students have to find a new teacher if they still want a class. If the students discover they don't want to go on, the teachers have to find some other way to occupy themselves at the appointed hour.

There is another kind of class at school, from time to time. It happens when people feel they have something new and unique to say that can't be found in books, and they think others may be interested. They post a notice: "Anyone interested in X can meet me in the Seminar Room at 10:30AM on

Thursdays." Then they wait. If people show up, they go on. If not, that's life. People can show up the first time and, if there is a second time, decide not to come back.

I've done this kind of thing several times. The first session, I usually get a crowd: "Let's see what he's up to." The second session, fewer come. By the end, I have a small band who are truly curious about what I have to say on the subject at hand. It's a form of entertainment for them, and a way for me (and others) to let people know how we think.

### 3

## Persistence

It's a problem with words again. The way I just described it, learning sounds casual, loose, laid back. Easy come, easy go. Random. Chaotic. Undisciplined.

Often I wish that were true.

When school first opened, thirteen year old Richard enrolled and quickly found himself absorbed in classical music – and in the trumpet. Richard soon was sure he had found his life interest. With Jan, a trombonist, available on the staff to help him, Richard threw himself into his studies.

Richard practiced the trumpet four hours every day. We could hardly believe it. We suggested other activities, to no avail. Whatever Richard did – and he did a lot at school – he always found four hours to play.

He came from Boston, 1-1/4 hours each way every day, often 1/2 hour or more on foot from the Framingham bus station. Like the proverbial postman, "in rain or shine, hail or sleet" Richard made it to school, and to our eardrums.



It was not long before we discovered the virtues of the old millhouse by the pond. Built of granite, roofed with slate, nestled in a distant corner of the campus, the old neglected building took on sudden beauty in our eyes. And in Richard's. In no time at all it was turned into a music studio, where Richard could practice to his heart's content.

He practiced.

Four or more hours a day, for four years.

Not long after graduating from school, after completing further studies at a conservatory, Richard became first horn of a major symphony orchestra.

Richard was followed soon by Fred, whose love was drums. Drums in the morning, drums in the afternoon, drums at night. Emergency action was in order. We fixed up a drum room for him in the basement, and gave him the key to the school so he could play early, late, and on weekends.

We discovered that the basement wasn't all that isolated acoustically from the rest of the building. It was often like living near a jungle village, with the constant beat of drums in the background.

Fred moved on at the age of eighteen after two years. We loved him, but many of us wished him godspeed.

It isn't only music that brings out the stubborn persistence we all have inside us. Every child soon finds an area, or two, or more, to pursue relentlessly.

Sometimes, it isn't even material they enjoy. Year after year, older students with their hearts set on college drive themselves steadily through the SAT's, the infamous "aptitude" tests which measure children's ability to take SAT tests – and which colleges everywhere seize upon to help them make their hard admissions decisions. Usually, the kids find a staff member to help them over rough spots. But the work

is their own. Thick review books are dragged from room to room, pored over, worked through page by page. The process is always intense. Rarely does it take more than four or five months from beginning to end, though for many this is their first look at the material.

There are writers who sit and write hours every day. There are painters who paint, potters who throw pots, chefs who cook, athletes who play.

There are people with common everyday interests. And there are others with exotic interests.

Luke wanted to be a mortician. Not your most common ambition in a fifteen year old. He had his reasons. In his mind's eye, he could clearly see his funeral home ministering to the needs of the community, and himself comforting the grieving relatives.

Luke threw himself into his studies with a passion: science, chemistry, biology, zoology. By sixteen, he was ready for serious work. We took him out into the real world. The chief pathologist at one of the regional hospitals welcomed the eager, hard-working student into his lab. Day by day, Luke learned more procedures, and mastered them, to the delight of his boss. Within a year, he was performing autopsies at the hospital, unassisted, under his mentor's supervision. It was a first for the hospital.

Within five years, Luke was a mortician. Now, years later, his funeral home has become a reality.

Then there was Bob.

One day, Bob came to me and said, "Will you teach me physics?" There was no reason for me to be skeptical. Bob had already done so many things so well that we all knew how he could see things through to the end. He had run the school press. He had written a thoroughly researched (published) book on the school's judicial system. He had devoted untold hours to studying the piano.

So I readily agreed. Our deal was simple.

I gave him a college textbook, thick and heavy, on introductory physics. I had taught from it often in the past, even used an earlier version when I was a beginner. I knew the pitfalls. "Go through the book page by page, exercise by exercise," I told Bob, "and come to me as soon as you have the slightest problem. Better to catch them early than to let them grow into major blocks." I thought I knew exactly where Bob would stumble first.

Weeks passed. Months.

No Bob.

It wasn't like him to drop something before – or after – he had gotten into it. I wondered whether he had lost interest. I kept my mouth shut and waited.

Five months after he had started, Bob asked to see me. "I have a problem on page 252," he said. I tried not to look surprised. It took five minutes to clear up what turned out to be a minor difficulty.

I never saw Bob again about physics. He finished the whole book by himself. He did algebra and calculus without even asking if I would help him. I guess he knew I would.

Bob is a mathematician today.

## 4

# The Sorcerer's Apprentice

When Luke went to work for the hospital pathologist, he became Sudbury Valley's first official outside apprentice.

There was no way we could arrange for Luke to do autopsies on campus. No matter how elaborate the lab facilities on campus, they could not have handled human cadavers.

At age fifteen Luke could have taken one of two turns. Either he could wait six or seven years until he was old enough and through with college, and then go on to his chosen field; or he could move ahead when he was ready, which was right away.

We saw no reason he should wait. We went to local doctors and pleaded our case, until we found one who saw things our way. We made an agreement with him, much like the teaching deals struck at school: You get Luke as an assistant, free of charge because it is part of his education; in return, you give Luke this and that specific training. The training was spelled out in detail. Everyone involved approved the terms, and the school's first apprenticeship program was on its way.

The idea caught on. When Jill developed an interest in theater, she soon was ready to go beyond the school. The production end was her thing – makeup, costumes, scenery, lighting. She apprenticed to the Loeb Theater in Cambridge, and before long she was being hired to assist in professional theaters all over the country. Her new-found trade helped pay her way through college, where a degree in theater furthered her career.

When to stay on campus, when to move on? It has often been a difficult question to decide. At age fourteen, Saul became absorbed in photography. Before long, he was using the school's darkroom, mastering the ABC's of a photolab. He soon became dissatisfied with the school's facilities, but instead of looking elsewhere, he decided to improve upon what was here. Slowly, laboriously, he learned carpentry in the shop. He studied technical photographic manuals. In the course of a year, he completely rebuilt the photolab, purchasing used equipment as needed. Since he was the fourth person at school to fall in love with photography and rebuild the darkroom, by the time he was done the place really looked great.

Even that wasn't enough by the time he had reached age sixteen. He needed hands-on training from a master. Week after week, Saul trudged around Boston, looking for a commercial photographer who would take him on as an apprentice. The response was not encouraging. "Go to college," said one. "Work in a mass processing lab," said another.

By the time he got to Joe, he knew how to plead his case. The objections were pushed aside, one by one. But Joe didn't want to risk training a young kid. "I've dealt with teenagers," he said, "and they are all irresponsible. They don't come on time, they mess up, they slouch on the job." Saul persisted. The school backed him up, and made a firm commitment. Two days a week, Saul rode the bus to Boston and worked for Joe.

He started from scratch. By the end of the year, his

apprenticeship complete, he was asked to stay on and run Joe's lab.

Today, Saul is an art photographer, and an accomplished technical practitioner in the commercial end of the field.

So far, only one apprenticeship has failed. That happened when the Master turned out to be too irresponsible to keep his end of the deal. After a while, the student gave up and looked elsewhere.

One man has trained more of our apprentices than anyone else over the years.

Alan White is a general contractor. When the school first opened, he was a public school principal, headed up the administrative ladder. Alan is blessed with the ideal talents for a successful administrator. He has lots of brains, but does not show off. He has an even temperament, and never loses his cool. He is fair, sweet, reasonable, organized.

When we first opened, Alan was the only public school administrator in the whole Boston metropolitan area who responded to our direct invitation to see what we were doing. He was curious.

His curiosity almost did him in.

It wasn't long before Alan, now a superintendent of schools in a local town, became deeply involved with school reform. Sudbury Valley had become his hobby. The more he saw at our school, the more he was driven to make changes, however few, in the public schools.

His town was soon torn apart with raging controversy. His model alternative public school, vividly recalled and loved fifteen years later by those who went there and worked there, soon was forced back into the fold.

Alan left public education. He left his tenure, his growing retirement benefits, his perks. He went back to an old love,

carpentry, and soon was a general contractor.

Through all the years, Alan has never left our side. He was there to help, advise, and comfort us. From the first year on, he was re-elected year after year as President of the school corporation.

And when someone at school became interested in carpentry or construction, he soon found himself apprenticed to Alan. Four students went through Alan's hands, learned the trade, and went on to practice professionally.

The apprenticeship program made it possible for Alan to stay in education, in the real sense of the word. And it has given many others the thrill of working as Masters with eager, energetic young learners.

## 5

### The Other 'R' s

In close to two decades, there has never been a case of dyslexia at Sudbury Valley. No one knows exactly why. The cause of dyslexia, the nature of dyslexia, the very existence of dyslexia as a true functional disorder are matters of great dispute. Some authorities say that as much as 20% of the population suffers from this alleged disorder.

The fact is, we have never seen it at the school. It just might be because we have never made anyone learn how to read.

Reading puts us hard to the test. As with everything else, we let the initiative come from the child. There is no prompting from us. No one says, "Learn to read now!" No one asks, "Wouldn't you like to learn to read now?" No one suggests, "Don't you think it would be a good idea if you learned to read now?" And no one offers, with feigned excitement, "Wouldn't it be fun to read?" Our credo is: Wait for the student to take the first step.



It's easy to live up to your beliefs when things come out the way everyone would like them to. Take my own family. Our oldest child got interested in reading at the age of five. On his own, he was a reader at six. No problem. Everything "worked" just fine.

Then came our daughter, two and a half years younger. As with everyone else at school, we waited

for her to ask to be taught to read – or to teach herself. We waited. And waited. And waited.

That she didn't read at six was fine, as far as the world was concerned.

That she didn't read at seven was not so hot in people's eyes. Grandparents, acquaintances, began to get uneasy, dropped hints in our direction.

That she didn't read at eight was a scandal with family and friends. We were seen as delinquent parents. The school? Well, the school could hardly be a proper school if it allowed eight year olds to be illiterate without taking remedial action.

At school, no one seemed to notice at all. Most of her eight year old friends could read. Some couldn't. She herself didn't care. Her days at school were busy, and happy.

At nine, she decided she wanted to read. I don't know why she made that decision then, and she doesn't remember. By nine and a half, she was a complete reader. She could read anything. She wasn't a "problem" for anyone now. Of course, she never had been a problem.

There was nothing atypical about our personal experience. At school, some kids read early, some read late. All of them read when they are ready, not a minute earlier. All of them eventually read, just fine.

Some of the late readers become bookworms. Some of the early readers master the skill and then rarely crack a book.

We don't have a single elementary reading textbook in the



school. No first grade, second grade, third grade primers. I wonder how many adults, other than professional teachers, ever looked at an elementary reader. They are stupefyingly simple-minded, boring, and irrelevant. To the modern child, streetwise and nurtured on TV, these books can only seem idiotic. Certainly, I've never seen a child pick one up to read for pleasure.

In fact, no one at school bothers much about reading. Only a few kids seek any help at all when they decide to learn. Each child seems to have their own method. Some learn from being read to, memorizing the stories and then ultimately reading them. Some learn from cereal boxes, others from game instructions, others from street signs. Some teach themselves letter sounds, others syllables, others whole words. To be honest about it, we rarely know how they do it, and they rarely can tell us. One day I asked a child who had just become a reader, "How did you learn to read?" His answer: "It was easy. I learned 'in.' I learned 'out.' And then I knew how to read."

It turns out that reading is much like speaking for kids. Society doesn't put kids in speaking classes. (Probably that's only because they virtually always learn to speak before the schools get hold of them. I guess if one year olds went to school, there would be speaking classes too, together with a full panoply of newly-discovered "speaking disorders.") A very few unfortunate children have functional speech disorders that require treatment. The overwhelming majority somehow – and no one knows how – teach themselves to talk.

Why do kids learn speech? The fact is, infants are surrounded by a world of humans who communicate through speech. There is nothing children want more than to master that world. Try to stop them! A child's struggle to learn how to speak is an epic of determination and persistence.

The same thing happens with reading at Sudbury Valley. When kids are left to their own devices, they eventually see for

themselves that in our world, the written word is a magic key to knowledge. When curiosity finally leads them to want that key, they go after it with the same gusto they show in all their other pursuits.

And it's so much easier for them than learning how to speak. They are older and more experienced at learning new things. They know what language is, how it works, what words are. Learning to read takes a fraction of the time and effort needed for speech.

Writing is something different again.

A lot of kids want not only to write, but to write nicely. It's a matter of aesthetics. So they go to someone to learn the art of writing nicely. It's like painting, or embroidery.

The perception of writing as an aesthetic skill can sometimes lead to real oddities. It's not unusual to see little kids spending hours learning pretty script. But it's strange when half of them don't know how to read!

"Why are you learning calligraphy if you can't read?" I have often asked.

"Because it's pretty," comes the answer.

Some kids learn handwriting as an art, then move on to something else and forget it. A few years later they learn how to read, and learn to write all over again!

I guess it's worth repeating. At Sudbury Valley, not one child has ever been forced, pushed, urged, cajoled, or bribed into learning how to read. We have had no dyslexia. None of our graduates are real or functional illiterates. Some eight year olds are, some ten year olds are, even an occasional twelve year old. But by the time they leave, they are indistinguishable. No one who meets our older students could ever guess the age at which they first learned to read or write.



## 6

### Fishing

Every year in early June John came to school to chat with me about his son. John was a gentle, intelligent man, warmly supportive of his son Dan, who attended the school.

But John was also worried. Just a little. Just enough to come once a year for reassurance.

Here's how the conversation would go.

J.F.: "I know the school's philosophy, and I understand it. But I have to talk to you. I'm worried."

Me: "What's the problem?" (Of course, I know. we both know. This is a ritual, because we both say the same thing every year, five years in a row.)

J.F.: "All Dan does at school all day is fish."

Me: "What's the problem?"

J.F.: "All day, every day, Fall, Winter, Spring. All he does is fish."

I look at him and wait for the next sentence. That one will be my cue.

J.F.: "I'm worried that he won't learn anything. He'll find himself grown up and he won't know a thing."

At this point would come my little speech, which is what he had come to hear. It's all right, I would begin. Dan has learned a lot. First of all, he's become an expert at fishing. He knows more about fish – their species, their habitats, their behavior, their biology, their likes and dislikes – than anyone I know, certainly anyone his age. Maybe he'll be a great fisherman. Maybe he'll write the next "Compleat Angler" when he grows up.

When I reached this part of my spiel, John would be a little uncomfortable. A snob he wasn't. But the picture of his son as a leading authority on fishing somehow didn't seem believable. I continued, warming up to my subject.

Mostly, I would say, Dan has learned other things. He has learned how to grab hold of a subject and not let go. He has learned to value the freedom to pursue his real interests however intensely he wants, and wherever they lead him. And he has learned how to be happy.

In fact, Dan was the happiest kid at school. His face was always smiling; so was his heart. Everyone, young and old, boys and girls, loved Dan.

Now my talk came to its close. "No one can take these things away from him," I said. "Some day, some year, if he loses interest in fishing, he'll put the same effort into some other pursuit. Don't worry."

John would get up, thank me warmly, and leave. Until next year. His wife Dawn never accompanied him. She was happy with Sudbury Valley, because she had a child who radiated joy.

Then one year John did not come in for our chat.

Dan had stopped fishing.

At fifteen, he had fallen in love with computers. By the age of sixteen, he was working as a service expert for a local firm.

By seventeen, he and two friends had established their own successful company in computer sales and service. By eighteen, he had completed school and gone on to study computers in college. He had saved enough money for his tuition and expenses. Throughout his years at college he was employed as a valued expert at Honeywell.

Dan never forgot what he learned in his many years of fishing.

Many people have written volumes about the wonders and beauties of fishing. We have seen it for ourselves at the school. Kids love to fish. It is relaxing and challenging. It is outdoors – rain or shine. Standing on the bank of the school's millpond, you are surrounded by the rustling trees, the soft grey granite buildings, the rushing stream under the mill dam. Most of the kids who fish see the beauty. All of them feel it.

Fishing is social. They fish with friends, or learn from their elders. Every year we see a new generation of five and six year olds struggling to learn the ropes.

Fishing can also be asocial. You can be alone, if you want to. No one will bother you. It's the code. Often someone will go out for a day with a rod and reel just to be alone, to think, to meditate.

Fishing, in a quiet way, is an important part of life at school. I often wonder at how lucky we were to find a campus with a pond.

My experience with Dan and John happened in the early days of the school. It made me think about the school and what it means. So I was completely comfortable when my youngest son started to fish all day long. It was *deja vu*.

And I knew that he knew what he was doing.

## 7

## Noah's Ark

We had thought it a plus that the buildings we bought for the school included stables and a coachhouse barn. They were pretty, and might provide a setting for animal husbandry.

It started out innocently enough. Molly, a horsewoman with a reputation in these parts, asked if she could teach riding out of our stables. We never hesitated, though it took hours of discussion to agree on sensible terms. When the school opened on July 1, 1968, we were able to offer riding lessons at a slight extra fee.

By July 2, we had found out that Molly herself had moved into the coachhouse, lock, stock, and barrel. She had nowhere else to live! Since there was neither a bathroom nor a kitchen there, we began to have our doubts.

The horses were housed in the stables. No obvious provisions were made to keep them clean. Day by day, a mountain of horse manure began to build itself against the stable walls. That's not all it was against. It was against health and fire regu-

lations too.

During the opening days, this was the least of our worries. Mercifully, most of the students didn't know a horse from a hippo. Molly couldn't make ends meet, and soon she was gone.

But her legacy lived on.

"We'd like to raise goats in the stables and barn," said the Wilson kids. They were arguing their case forcefully before the School Meeting, where the decisions were made. We tried to think of all the objections we could.

"You'll have to care for them on weekends and holidays," we said.

"No problem," came the reply. There were four of them – three boys and a girl, and they would split the job.

"You don't know about rearing goats," we argued.

"Not true. We've read and we've helped raise someone else's goats. Now we want to learn to raise our own. Our mother will help." Mother was a teacher at the school.

Oh well, we thought, it's a legitimate educational request.

There is no question that the learning took place. So did a lot else. For starters, it became a lot less pleasant to use our beautiful grounds, because goats defecate everywhere. It seems that every time one of the Wilsons – or one of the many eager helpers they acquired – took the goats for a walk, the little darlings left a palpable trail. No odor, mind you. But not what you'd want to sit down in for a friendly chat.

Then there were the escapes. Goats are lively, lithe, and determined. Somehow, they managed to get free about once a week. Now that I look back on it, I'm not at all sure it was always accidental. Escapes caused delightful mayhem in the school. Everyone ran out to help recapture them, or to watch someone else do it. Amid much shouting, running, and squealing, the job would get done. Sometimes it involved a neighboring property. That hardly improved our public image.

By and by the Wilsons got tired of the goats. Long after the rest of us had.

Then came the rabbits.

"We want to learn how to raise rabbits commercially," they said. This time it was the three Wilson boys and their friend Andy. The Wilson Gang, they were called.

Weakly, we rolled out all our old objections. It was no use. We knew we were beaten.

They had proven they could take care of animals. The rabbits would be caged – no escapes. We knew there would be no escapes, since you can hardly ever recapture a rabbit.

The barn was turned into a rabbit factory. Until the Wilson Gang got tired of rabbits.

The students' devotion to their animals has on occasion led to epic adventures. Like the day of the great blizzard of '75. Roads were impassable, schools and businesses shut. It was out of the question for Marge to take Chris and Amy to the stables that day to care for their animals.

"Please, mother," they begged, "the goats need to be fed and watered."

"I just can't drive you," she answered. "Cars aren't even supposed to be out on the streets."

Without further ado, the two of them set out in the storm on a seven mile trek to school. The goats were lovingly tended, and six hours later Amy and Chris returned to their anxious mother.

The barn has since been renovated, and the animal stalls removed. But the stables still remain. It's still possible to raise horses at school, and from time to time some students will surely try their hand at it. Until animals go completely out of fashion with kids.

## 8

# Chemistry

Things do, after all, go out of fashion all the time.

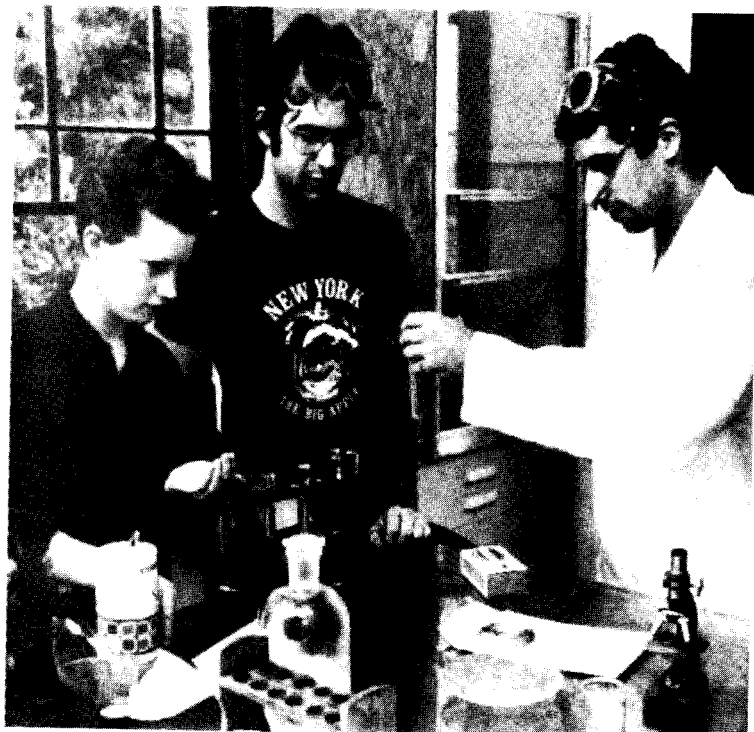
In my youth, the neighborhood "geniuses" were always chemists. They had labs in their basements, where they spent most of their time. Every now and then, we would hear of a fire or explosion set off by a young mad scientist who had mixed the wrong brew.

By the late sixties, this type of thing was no longer front and center. Even though we had Hanna, an experienced chemist, teaching at school, the demand was never there.

We opened school without a chemistry lab. For years it stayed that way.

Then one day several students got the bug for chemistry. Something had to be done.

There was hardly any money around for anything at the time. It was the early '70s, and we were struggling mightily. Lab equipment carried price tags that were out of sight. If we tried



to do what every other school did, we would spend more on the lab than we had spent on everything else since the day we started.

Hanna had worked as a biochemist at MIT before getting involved with the school. She still had friends there, and in other universities. She remembered the way things were done in her old haunts. Every year, people would start new projects, always with lots of

spanking new equipment. Every year, tons of old equipment and furniture were junked.

She decided to go after the "junk", most of which was as good as new. Patiently, with her list of needs in hand, Hanna called around to various chemistry and biology departments. Within a few weeks, she had every single piece she needed.

These were not educational replicas built for the school market. Everything was professional quality: lab tables, a sink, cabinets, glassware, microscope, chairs, the works. All we had to buy was a fire extinguisher, a fire blanket, and some wood, a fan, and a storm window to build a hood. It's not that we could not have gotten a hood too, it's just that all the ones available were too big for the room.

Several months were spent putting together the lab. When the local inspectors had given it their blessing, it was ready to be used.

Chemistry still isn't very popular these days. Every year, just a little work is done, but it is done with style.

Not all the chemical experiments were always done in the lab.

One day I walked into school and smelled something funny. I couldn't quite place it, because I had never encountered that particular odor before. It was faint, and I thought it was coming from the basement.

I asked around. Did anyone else smell something funny?

No, no one. Several people were uneasy. The Wilson Gang, hanging around the kitchen when I came in, looked at the ceiling and tried to hide their smiles.

That was enough of a clue for me. Something new was cooking, I thought. And cooking it turned out to be.

In the back of the basement, far out of sight, they had built—a methane plant!

The time was the mid-seventies. The country, the world, was going through the great energy crisis. Everywhere, people were talking about alternative energy sources: water power, solar power, tide power — and garbage power. And few things were more effective for making flammable gas than animal wastes.

I had always wondered what the Wilsons did with the waste from their rabbit operation. Now I found out. Patiently building the gas generator piece by piece, they had put it all together in a few weeks. The rabbit feces cooked in the fermentation tank, and the methane collected in gas tanks. It was all so simple. It would probably have gone on for months if the faint odor of rabbit-dung hadn't begun to permeate the school.

It's not that the Wilsons had hidden what they were doing from anyone. They had asked permission from David, who was in charge of the school's relations with local inspectors. David wasn't a chemist. They carefully explained everything they wanted him to hear. We couldn't blame David. Was it just a coincidence that not a single scientifically trained staff member had been consulted?

The methane plant was removed before we had a chance to find out just how powerful a source of energy it might be.

## 9

# A-Hunting We Will Go

The materials for the methane plant had come from the Sudbury Town Dump. So did the materials for the four power mowers that cut the grass for several years. So did bicycles, cars, golf carts, and assorted paraphernalia, put together by the enterprising boys. Every week, Hanna was corralled to take the Wilson Gang and their buddies for an updated survey of the dump's latest acquisitions.

That was an extreme, but the idea was rooted in the Sudbury Valley tradition. We could never understand why schools always had to pay so much for new furnishings, when so much good stuff was available used, or even free.

Before we opened, we had to furnish the building. For the most part, we wanted household furniture: tables, chairs, sofas, lamps, rugs. With our limited funds in hand, we went scouring the used furniture stores in the region.

One day, after a string of disappointments, we hit Lou's in South Framingham. We told him who we were, and what we wanted.

"I can't believe it," he said. "Just six months before you bought your building, the former owners came to me and asked me to buy a huge load of beautiful old furniture that almost filled the barn. It went for a song, and could have equipped you for ten years." Lou felt sorry for us. We were downcast. From that day on, he became one of our chief suppliers, selling us assorted pieces as they came into his warehouse, year after year.

Much of what we got was free. Parents gave us their used sofas and rugs when they were remodeling. One day, Alan White came in from one of his construction jobs, where he was remodeling an apartment-house lobby. He had with him a rug he had just removed from the premises, in excellent shape. Our biggest room soon sported a wall-to-wall carpet.

The colors didn't always match, but we did our best, moving things around to improve the aesthetics. In fact, the biggest arguments over the years always had to do with decorating. Students and staff could easily wrangle for hours over the pros and cons of this or that color scheme or furniture arrangement. The give and take could get heated; matters of aesthetic principle were involved.

Somewhere along the way, to localize the uproars, we formed a committee to handle these matters. Anyone could join. At first, it was named "Painting and Hanging Committee," activities that presumably covered the field! Later, it adopted the more neutral name, "Aesthetics Committee." The only thing decidedly not aesthetic about this committee is the heat and sound generated by their debates.

Lots was free. The Chem Lab, for instance. The beautiful slide and swing set, donated by one family on the death of the father, an engineer who had designed and built the set himself for his now grown children. Much of the darkroom was donated, as was most of the library, and a good one it is. We

never had to buy a refrigerator. A few good tents came our way for our camping trips.

One Christmas Eve there was a breakin at school, and our two electric IBM typewriters were stolen – two of the only items of real value we owned. A couple of kids lost their bikes and guitars too. And the stereo system was gone. It was a bleak holiday for the school.

By early January, one parent had given us his old electric Remington, which still worked. When I went to the local typewriter store to inquire about used electrics, we got to talking. By the time we were through, the owner had donated a second Remington out of compassion! Within a year, by the time the old Remingtons had just about given up the ghost from months of heavy use, another IBM selectric and a bigger Remington were donated to replace them.

Often, we got a lot more than we bargained for. When we first accepted donated books, we took everything. Soon, basement and attic were filled with esoterica worthy of an Ivy League school. Luckily, we didn't have to pay to haul it all out: a rare book dealer took it out for us, and even left some money behind.

Then there was the time we looked like a used appliance store, with a lineup of extra refrigerators.

Or the day we were offered six large commercial knitting machines. They worked, but were obsolete. The donor was a Trustee, owner of a large knitting mill. He was sure we could use the machines to teach knitting and produce sweaters to help support the school. They would have occupied half a floor! With some difficulty, we declined the offer, but I'm not sure he ever got over the feeling that we were being difficult and spoiled.

One fine spring morning Joan came in, breathless. "I've got to get Marge and go right out this second," she said, with



a tone of urgency.

Ten minutes later they were back, triumphant. On her way to school, Joan had spotted four caned chairs sitting atop the trash some homeowner had left on the street, to be picked up that morning. The sanitation truck was due any minute, and Joan was racing against it. I couldn't believe my eyes.

"These look like junk," I said, "even by our standards."

"Wait and see," Joan and Marge answered.

I waited – and saw. With their expert eye, they had spotted four fine chairs, in need of a cleaning and some minor repairs. Two hours later, the school sported a shiny set, as good as new, proudly occupying our newly remodeled music room.

It was all in a day's work.

## 10

### Special Expenditure

Not everything is free, of course. Or even used and cheap.

The school building came equipped with a stove which looked like a certified antique. We left it in place, so that there could be cooking instruction if anyone asked for it.

By one of those quirks of fate, it turned out that lots of kids were interested in cooking, year in, year out; and that we had a great cook on our staff, along with several not-so-great-but-rathergood cooks. In other words, cooking has always been big at Sudbury Valley. In fact, after a few years at school, Margaret Parra, our resident master chef, published a cookbook that has delighted thousands of users. And several of our graduates have gone on to apprenticeships, or to advanced schools, and become master chefs themselves.

All of which brings me back to the stove. It didn't take long for us to realize that it just wouldn't do. It wasn't only old, it was lousy. And no one thought much of the idea of getting used stoves. We had one already.

What was clearly called for was a "special expenditure", as such an outlay is called. Enough to buy two large four-burner single-oven ranges. The only problem was that the money hadn't been provided in the regular budget, and there was no way to squeeze it out.

The special expenditure called for special measures. So all the kids and staff interested in cooking got together and organized a series of bake sales to raise money for the new stoves.

There was the Thanksgiving bake sale, as a warmup. Flyers were sent to all parents, with a price list and order forms. The response was good, and everyone involved learned how to handle the mass production.

Then there was the big Christmas holiday bake sale, conducted at a local supermarket, which was kind enough to provide us with space to pursue our noble cause. A group of students spent the whole night at my house baking for this one – breads, cakes, cookies, rolls, tarts, muffins, biscuits – a huge mountain of goodies. When morning came, a few of us dragged ourselves to the market and set up shop. By 1:00PM, everything was gone.

Little bake sales all year long, aimed at the students and staff, netted a small, steady flow. Occasionally, there were sandwich sales, or salads, or hot meals.

The final effort came at Easter, to parents again. When that was over, we had the money we needed for our stoves. And we had a Sudbury Valley tradition for special expenditures.

That's how it's been ever since. Usually, when someone asks the School Meeting for special funds, the response is: "If you really want it badly enough, you should be able to help defray the costs." Sometimes the School Meeting insists that all the money be raised by the petitioners; sometimes, only a token amount; but most of the time, the school goes 50-50 with them.

This kind of arrangement has provided people around school with a lot of good food over the years, because food sales always work if the food is tasty. Money has been raised to equip sports activities, the darkroom, the leatherworking shop, and to buy several stereo systems, among other things. Sometimes other activities are used to raise money, like the time four students mowed the school's grounds to help equip the woodworking shop.

So successful was this kind of focused fundraising that the alumni decided to join in too. Every year, they ask what particular need the school has that lies outside the regular budget. The first one was a computer. Later, there was a printer, library bookshelves, a large rug, furniture, the barn remodeling, and so on.

To help pay for these things, the alumni organized events, like a yard-sale in downtown Framingham. But the big ones, the fun ones, have been the school auctions, to which students, parents, and alumni are invited as participants on both sides of the counter. They provide the goods and services to be auctioned, and they bid for them as well. All in all, it's always a great social event.

Most unusual are the services offered for auction, which reveal a cross-section of local talent. A lawyer donates a consultation for a will; a builder donates assistance in planning a new home or renovation; a boat-owner offers a family outing on the ocean. Students offer a day of yard-work, or baby-sitting.

And the school's special expenditures are defrayed.

The method is entrepreneurial – and contagious. One day three ten year olds devoted to fishing decided they wanted a boat. High finance was involved, and bake sales at school offered a proven method for raising the money.

The only problem was, this was not a school expenditure, it was a private one.

The threesome gave it a lot of thought, and finally came

to the School Meeting with a deal: "You let us operate a private bake-sale concession under specified conditions, and we'll give the school 10% of the profits."

So was born the private concession at school. Not big business for us, to be sure, but dear to the hearts of the entrepreneurs.

They raised the money for the boat. And for a trailer. And for a motor.

And the school added another colorful tradition to its collection.

## 11

# Fads and Fashions

Sudbury Valley is a "cool" school.

There are no fixed courses or departments. Everything begins and ends with the students' interests. This means we can really keep up with the times. All the way.

In the mid-seventies, leatherwork was the rage from coast to coast. It wasn't long before our teenagers got into it. They got a head start from the woodworking shop specialist on the staff, Jim Nash, who just happened to be a bona fide craftsman in leather.

In no time at all, the kids and Jim went to the School Meeting for permission to use one of the general purpose rooms as a leather shop. They showed up in force, and made their case. An official group of people interested in leather was set up to run the practical end.

Lots of research was done on how to set things up properly, and where to get supplies at the best price. Before long, with the aid of the School Meeting and some fund-raisers, a beauti-

ful, fully equipped leather shop was up and running.

We developed a new twist for everyday expenses, one that later came in handy over and over. To cover current operations, the leather shop was run like a mini-business. Seed money came from the School Meeting, as a loan. This provided working capital for materials, primarily different kinds of leathers, but also buckles, snaps, buttons, and other miscellaneous paraphernalia. The materials were bought in bulk at wholesale, and resold to people who used them in the shop, at a slight markup. It all ran on the honor system. Before long, as people produced prodigious quantities of belts, wallets, moccasins, vests, bracelets, anklets, pants, etc., the leather operation was able to repay the loan, which then could be re-used as seed money for some other activity. There was even money left over to buy occasional esoteric new equipment.

At its peak, the leatherworking shop was one of the main centers of the school. A dozen or more people at a time could be found there almost every day, working for hours on their projects. Before Christmas, it was standing room only, as people rushed to make gifts for friends and relatives.

Then, almost as quickly as it came, it faded away. The fad peaked and waned in the country, and at school. After a couple of years of hectic activity, the shop fell silent. The room got virtually no use.

Soon, the equipment was packed up in boxes, the materials sold off. The leather shop reverted to a general purpose room. There was no fanfare attached to this process. Everyone understood how to roll with the cyclic nature of human interests.

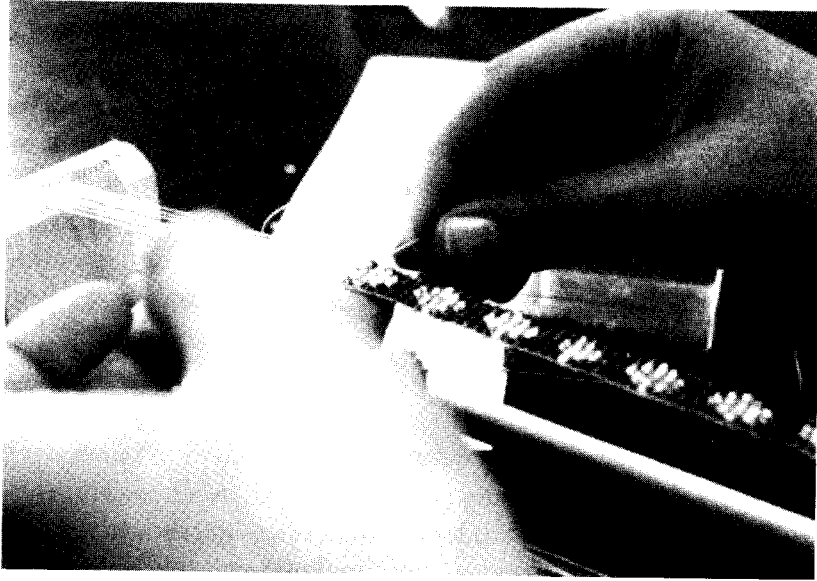
The leatherworking story has repeated itself with all sorts of pursuits. Sometimes, they involved fads that were popular all over the country. Along with everyone else, we had our fling with video games, hackysack, ice skating, oriental religions, and

gymnastics. Sometimes, a fad came to stay, and develop into a deep-rooted interest. As computers moved front and center in the world, we purchased one, using funds raised at auctions. Year after year, it taught computer whizzes the ins and outs of the medium. After five years with an Apple II, we bought a more advanced machine, which runs our office and also serves as a more sophisticated instrument for the experts to play with.

Current events sometimes capture the attention of virtually the whole school community. When the Watergate hearings that ultimately led to President Nixon's resignation began to run on television day and night, people everywhere spent hours watching them unfold. No soap opera ever came close to the gripping drama of these hearings. The older students rounded up an old black-and-white 19" TV set, placed it in one of the largest rooms available, and watched. Younger students soon joined in, and occasionally some staff members. Week after week, the hearings served as an advanced course in political science, American history, and current events. No one could have wished for a higher interest level, or greater absorption rate, on the part of the students.

I remember thinking at the time: where else could this have happened? While students and teachers in schools and colleges all over the country were tied to their textbooks and predetermined course materials, we could easily immerse ourselves in history as it was being made. At Sudbury Valley, there was no need to wait three or four years until the material could work its way into a textbook, and out of the students' focus of interest.

When the hearings were over, life returned to normal. No one seemed to know what to do with the TV set. It sat around, largely unused, for a year or two. One day it stopped working. We didn't dig up another one until the Iranian hostage crisis.



## 12

# School Corporation

When people with common interests got together, they would often look for a way to organize themselves. Some sort of structure was needed for continuity and stability in managing their daily operations. We looked for a simple way to meet this need.

Other schools covered specific interests through Departments or Clubs. We knew we didn't want that. Somehow, the image of virtually eternal departments, with jealously guarded domains, didn't appeal to us. It didn't fit the free flow of learning and teaching at Sudbury Valley. In the early sixties, I had taught in the Physics Department of one of the "Seven Sister Colleges." Fifty years earlier, that Department must have been an important part of the college. In a four-story building, physics took up half of an entire floor! By the time I got there, out of a student body of well over 1000, there were five physics majors – and they studied virtually all their courses across the street, at the associated men's college. But the depart-

ment still occupied a full suite of now basically empty rooms, at a time when there was such a need for space that several new buildings were being constructed. I saw similar anomalies many times elsewhere.

No thanks, no departments for us. What then? We hit on the idea of a new creation, the School Corporation. This was to be chartered by the School Meeting for a defined purpose, and given the mandate to look after its goals pretty much on its own, coming back only when it needed money or facilities. Anyone interested could join the corporation, which ran itself, and elected an Executive Director to deal with administration.

The School Corporation became the formal vehicle for transacting "departmental business," with several novel features: it was open to everyone; it was democratically run; and, when its mission was no longer needed, it could gracefully pass into oblivion.

When the idea of the School Corporation was first born and approved by the School Meeting, there was a flurry of activity, as all sorts of groups who had been looking after areas of interest decided to get themselves official status. Within a few months, there was a Corporation for arts and art supplies, one for sculpture and pottery, one for music, one for singing, others for leatherworking, camping, hiking, chemistry, playroom activities, woodworking, audio-visual pursuits, photography, and on and on. We were on our way!

At first, people thought Corporations would make it easier for them to get their pet projects funded. Money requests coming from individuals were always subjected by the School Meeting to gruelling examination, and often turned down as unjustified. Many people thought that a request coming from something as impressive-sounding as a School Corporation

would carry more weight. That notion was quickly disabused. The first few requests for money got the same rough treatment, and most of them failed.

After a while, things sorted themselves out, and people got used to working in Corporations. Several have followed an erratic course over the years. The Audio-Visual Corporation generated a lot of action when it was first born; there were plenty of kids interested in movies, sound equipment, and especially in the portable TV camera donated to the school. Eventually, interest flagged. For years, the Corporation consisted of one person, who elected himself Executive Director. This was OK, since there was no minimum number of corporation members required. But it was all we could do to keep a straight face at School Meetings when the A-V Corporation made a request; the lone member couldn't, after all, make himself more than the one individual he was. After a long dry spell, people got interested in stereo equipment, and that corporation became a center of action again.

Some Corporations have many energetic members, others have only one. The Leatherworking Corporation in its heyday had about fifteen members; Woodworking usually has half a dozen or more. The Photography Corporation fluctuates, riding waves of interest and troughs of indifference. The Cooking Corporation always maintains a large active group.

Some Corporations have administrative tasks. The Source Corporation seeks outside instructors to fill gaps in the teaching staff when necessary. Occasionally, someone brought to the school in this way stays on and becomes a regular staff member at school. The Library Corporation takes care of the school library, the Press Corporation prints and distributes the school's publications.

Many Corporations have died and been buried, as their

constituencies dropped away. Leatherworking was the first to go. The Playroom Corporation lasted a few years, then disbanded. The Dungeons and Dragons Corporation rode one of the school's biggest fads through its cycle, then expired. The various art-related Corporations merged into one Arts and Crafts Corporation.

And then there is the Sports Corporation, which dies periodically only to rise again from its ashes. It was begun by a large group of eager athletes, who soon found that it was a lot easier to get a game going than it was to look after equipment, purchase, take inventory, and all the rest. Exit Sports Corporation. Then came a new generation who promised the School Meeting they'd do everything right. That reincarnation lasted a year. Exit Sports Corporation II. A few years later, a new group came who definitely, absolutely, and positively were going to have their act together and be entirely responsible for the sports equipment. The School Meeting staked them some money for new supplies, and waited. A year later, they had gone the way of their forebears. We are now working on Sports Corporation V. Hope springs eternal. Maybe there is something about the great outdoors that makes a mockery of order and organization.

## 13

### Discretionary Accounts

Not all expenditures are for groups. Often people need to buy things for themselves, individually. When someone cooks, or makes leather goods, or develops film, or throws pots on the wheel, they have to pay their own way for materials used.

It started in the kitchen. At first, each person would provide their own ingredients. It didn't take long to realize this was silly. It was a lot of work, and people forgot things. So each time the purchasing was organized by one person for everyone.

That worked fine as far as getting the ingredients was concerned. But then the problem shifted to the money. Instead of forgetting the ingredients, kids forgot the money. And when they brought it, we often wished they'd forgotten, because we had to deal with bills and change, and lug around lots of cash.

A new idea was needed.

The idea came in the form of "personal discretionary accounts" for each student and teacher. We decided to become

a mini-bank. Each person got their own account, into which they could put money – say, \$10.00 at a time.

Then we found a supplier who sold cheap books of receipts, that looked just like checks. Voila! The personal accounts became checking accounts. They could be drawn on by presenting a check. Once a week, someone cleared all these internal checks, adjusted the account balances, and there was no longer any need for cash at school.

Actually, our first try at this was a little different. We began the system by placing \$10.00 in everybody's account every year. We said, "This money is for educational materials you buy at school. Since we don't give out a lot of free materials, we'll dedicate \$10.00 of the tuition money for each student to their personal account to be used for any goods they need during the year. If they need more, they have to put in the rest themselves."

It sounded logical. The only trouble was, it didn't work. Quickly, we got a lesson in the psychology of the "free lunch."

As soon as everyone found out they had \$10.00 to spend without having to ante it up, they started working on ways to spend it. Kids who never had laid out a dime before suddenly developed an interest in all sorts of things that cost money. It was considered stupid to leave the money unspent because you couldn't think of something to spend it on.

True to our philosophy, the school did not set up a mechanism to approve these expenditures. "If it's discretionary, then that's what it is," we said, "and people must use their judgment, and theirs alone, to decide." Of course, we couldn't help noticing what people were buying. The school's books and files are open to all.

I guess a lot of people began to get jittery when the money started going to buy rock records. To a lot of us, that seemed to be stretching the idea of educational necessities just a bit. Not

long after, we began to notice a new concept in school supplies regularly appearing on the purchase record: pizza. I guess that did it. A very sizeable majority of School Meeting members decided that the school shouldn't be in the business of giving gifts to individuals. The \$10.00 bonanza was repealed.

Discretionary accounts work smoothly. Often, School Corporations buy materials in bulk for their members' private use, to be paid for by internal checks. This way, we get the benefits of price, as well as knowing that all the supplies are in.

And yes, we too have overdrawn accounts! Every now and then a check bounces. Just like the world outside.





## 14

### Cooking

The aroma of freshly baked bread floated through the school. Gradually, people wandered into the kitchen, waiting for the bread to emerge from the oven. In a few minutes, Margaret Parra was cutting thick, warm slices and selling them to all comers. The proceeds were for the Cooking Corporation. Butter was included in the price.

It was a scene repeated often over the years. Breads, pizzas, cakes, pies, cookies, biscuits, and more elaborate dishes flowed from Margaret's cornucopia, and into appreciative stomachs.

Not everyone was on the receiving end. There was always a small army of helpers to do the work. Sometimes, they asked her to make something with them, other times she would post a notice saying she would cook this-and-that on Tuesday and let people sign up to join her.

What a scene! One day it would be a bunch of little kids, seven, eight, or nine years old. Another day, a crowd of

teenagers. Much of the time, there were kids of all ages, working side by side. There were "cool" kids and "nerds," handy kids and klutzes, knowledgeable kids and neophytes. For all, the idea was to work with Margaret, learning how to cook, and much more to boot. If they paid for the ingredients, they could take the end product home – lasagna for a family dinner, for example, or a fancy dessert. Otherwise, the rest of the school would do the eating and the Cooking Corporation account would fatten up a little more.

Margaret was a unique institution in the school for its first sixteen years, until she retired from active service. A great cook and a magnificent teacher, her real specialty was her wisdom. Born and raised on a Midwestern farm, her life as the wife of a U.S. Naval Officer in the '30's and '40's had taken her all over the world, usually on her own steam, since the Navy wasn't too helpful with relocation in those days. In addition to a wealth of naval lore, and an expertise in very naval language, she had acquired a deep understanding of people.

The kids couldn't get enough of her. Everyone loved Margaret. The toughest teenage characters held her dear to their hearts as a friend. She would smoke and shoot the breeze with them for hours as an equal. Margaret never hesitated to give them a piece of her mind when she thought they were way off base, but she always treated them with respect and honored their differences. Six year olds were treated in much the same way, as pint-sized adults. If one of them got too lazy to clean up, they'd soon hear Margaret's booming voice uttering some aphorism that brought them to their senses.

For Margaret, the proof of the pudding was in the eating, in life as well as in cooking. And what eating! There were no end of ingenious dishes that she created. Cooking has been one of the central activities of the school every season, every year, primarily because under her guidance there developed a tradition

of excellence, hard work, and camaraderie.

Margaret brooked no nonsense during work. Everyone, regardless of age, had to carry their weight. Everyone could peel apples, measure ingredients, mix, watch the oven, and clean the dishes and tables. Everyone could help lay things out and put them away. Work began with a spotless kitchen and ended the same way under her supervision.



With Margaret as a model, others have taught and organized cooking activities too. Students who have been certified by the Cooking Corporation to work alone will often do their own thing, alone or in groups. Other staff members adept at cooking often get together with motley crews. Sometimes, a string of related cooking classes will take place over the year: bread-making, Chinese cuisine, basic cooking, to name a few.

Occasionally, staff members with exotic tastes try their hand. Sometimes, very exotic. Take Barbara, for example. She is

a holistic nutritionist with a penchant for natural foods – very, very "natural." Hers is no garden variety health food faddism. I mean, not just dropping in an occasional cup of whole wheat flour or tablespoon of honey and calling it "healthy". Barbara believes in no added sweeteners (or, at best, only a rare one), whole grains, fresh produce, and as little cooking with heat as possible. I have never met anyone else, for example, who would dream of making an unsweetened carrot cake entirely out of whole grain rye flour.

Barbara is also wonderful with people of all ages. So when Barbara posts a notice that she is cooking on a certain day, kids always sign up. They like being with her. Sometimes, they find out that the cooking side of it is a real challenge. Like the day her crew produced something that looked like chocolate chip cookies, but turned out to be rye/oat/sunflower-seed/soy-flour carob-chip cookies with no baking powder or sugar or honey, and sure didn't taste like chocolate chip cookies!

Every year in June there is a special day for making ice cream by the old-fashioned hand-cranked method. The tradition was started, of course, by Margaret, who began making ice cream as a little girl on the farm. As the ingredients for the day are unloaded – pure cream, ice, rock salt – the excitement quickly builds. Kids take turns cranking the machine for hours, the older ones doing it at the end when the turning is harder. Then the ice cream sets, and by 2:30 there is a long line snaking out of the kitchen through the building. Few things can match savoring a bowl of fresh ice cream with "all the fixin's" on a hot summer day. Even cleaning up the kitchen afterwards doesn't detract from the pleasure.

## 15

### Age Mixing

Age mixing is Sudbury Valley's secret weapon.

I never could make heads or tails of age segregation. People don't live their lives in the real world separated by age, year by year. Kids don't all have the same interests or abilities at a particular age.

Anyway, we soon found out how children mix when they are left to their own devices. They mix. Just like real people.

When I gave my sandwich-making seminar, I had twelve year olds and eighteen year olds and everything in between. Cooking crosses all boundaries easily. Years later, when I taught modern history, I had ten year old Adrian sitting together with boys and girls up to seventeen.

The principle is always the same: if anyone wants to do something, they do it. Interest is what counts. If the activity is



on an advanced level, skill counts. A lot of little kids are much more skillful than older ones at a lot of things.

When the skills and rate of learning aren't all on the same level, that's when the fun begins. The kids help each other. They have to, otherwise the group as a whole will fall behind. They want to, because they are not competing for grades or gold stars. They like to, because it's terribly satisfying to help someone else and succeed at it.

And it's terribly pleasing to watch. Everywhere you turn at school, age mixing confronts you.

Then there's the emotional side of it. It fills a real need for mothering or brothering for a sixteen year old to sit on a couch in the late afternoon, quietly reading to a six year old, snuggled up close. And it gives the six year olds a deep feeling of comfort and safety in a world where very big people surround them all the time. There is a feeling of self-worth that a twelve year old gets when she patiently explains the workings of a computer to a sixteen year old novice.

There's the social side. When the kids organized the first school dance, I had visions of a room ringed with terrified wall-flowers. Projection, it's called. My first school dance was in junior high school; wasn't it everybody's? The teachers put the boys on one side of the room, the girls on the other, and from there things went downhill.

The kids surprised us all. Everyone came, everyone danced together. Couples separated by ten years were as common as couples separated by one. A seven year old boy dancing with a fifteen year old girl won first prize! It was a great good time for everyone. As the years passed, the youngest became the oldest, and the pattern remained.

The older kids serve as role models, ideals, sometimes as gods, for the younger ones. Just as often, they serve as counter-models. "I'm glad I hung around the teenagers when I was

seven," our son Michael once said to us at age eighteen. "I learned what I didn't want to do by looking at it in the flesh, so I didn't have to waste my health and years of my life trying it out myself."

The younger kids serve as family models for the older ones – young sibling or child roles. When Sharon first came to school at age four, she had just lost her parents. She was everyone's "child" for her first year; she was read to, played with, talked with, cuddled. When former students visit for the day with their infants or toddlers, teenagers can often be found playing with the little ones for hours on end.

And there's the learning side. Kids love to learn from other kids. First of all, it's often easier. The child teacher is closer than an adult to the student's difficulties, having gone through them somewhat more recently. The explanations are usually simpler, better. There's less pressure, less judgment. And there's a huge incentive to learn fast and well, to catch up with the mentor.

Kids also love to teach. It gives them a sense of value, of accomplishment. More important, it helps them get a better handle on the material as they teach; they have to sort it out, get it straight. So they struggle with the material until it's crystal clear in their own heads, until it's clear enough for their pupils to understand.

As a secret weapon, age mixing is a blockbuster. It vastly increases the learning power and teaching power at school. It creates a human environment that is vibrant and real. The school has often been compared to a village, where everyone mixes, everyone learns and teaches and models and helps and scolds – and shares in life. I think the image is a good one.

Adults have a lot to learn from children too. I don't think I've ever seen it said better than it was by Hanna Greenberg, in her piece called "The Beech Tree." Here it is:

## THE BEECH TREE

On a glorious morning this Fall I "saw" the beech tree for the first time. That seems an amazing statement coming from a person who has been at SVS for eighteen years –amazing, but true. Like everyone else, I have seen the tree in the Fall when its leaves turn red and are then shed, letting the branches show their magnificent structure throughout the Winter. I have also witnessed a new growth of Spring when the budding leaves give the tree a pink halo and slowly turn to their deep green color. I have also seen generation after generation of little children learn to climb the mighty tree, going higher and higher, sometimes reaching its crown and perching there for hours. But it was only the other week that I really "saw" the tree, really understood it. Being an adult, I did not know truly to experience the tree, until a little girl taught me how. This is what happened.

One day, Sharon, her face beaming, announced to me (like many little ones before her) that she finally is able to climb into the beech tree all by herself. She said that Joyce had taught her how, and now she would show me. I went out with her because I wanted to share her joy and because the morning was so brilliant with vivid colors and luxuriant sunlight shimmering in the dew on the red and yellow leaves. Sharon showed me how she climbed and came down, and then told me to follow suit. Now, I had helped scores of children get up and many



more to get down when they felt stuck, but I had never attempted to climb the tree myself.

Sharon does not take "no" readily, and I knew that if I was to retain her respect for me, I just had to perform for her! She very patiently and clearly showed me, step by step, how to climb up and how to get down, and I did it for the first time ever.

When I got up to the first level I was struck by the beauty of the perch. I am not able to describe the mighty branches, the cozy space or the feelings of awe that overcame me. Suffice it to say that I realized that I had "seen" the tree for the first time. We adults think of ourselves as knowledgeable, and of our children as needing to learn and to be taught, but in this case I'd bet that any kid at SVS would be amazed at our ignorance and insensitivity to the grandeur that is there for us to see and is ignored. Sharon was a good teacher and I will always be grateful for what she taught me.



## 16

### Play

Day after day, month after month, a village was slowly taking shape before our eyes. Spread out over a large table appropriated from the art room, the plasticene model almost seemed real.

Often, six or more kids at a time would be huddled over the table for hours, chattering away, as they tried to create perfect miniature replicas of everything they could think of. Horses, trees, cars, trucks, animals, fences, people – everything. Not just any old replicas, but flawless reproductions. There was, for example, a complete "motor" under the (detachable!) hood of every automobile, the whole of which could easily fit into my hand. People finger-high had clothes and features. Roofs had tiles, walls had doors, interior rooms had tables and chairs.

All was made out of plasticene, worked and rolled and modeled and formed. It was a big game. The game lasted over two years.

No one suggested even remotely that these children, aged

eight to fourteen (mostly boys), were "doing" art, for example. The idea would have offended them. No staff help was asked for, none was given. To the participants, it was play. Serious, concentrated, play, great fun without limits.



Every generation at school seems to have its serious "clubs." It usually starts at around nine or ten years old, with an occasional younger hanger-on tolerated, and lasts a year or two for each new group. There is a club, and of course a clubhouse. At first that was an old ramshackle hut in the woods, until that fell down. Later, it was a room in the stables. Then it was a large closet in the main building. Still later, when that was off limits because of fire regulations, the club-house could be any "secret" area enclosed, if necessary, by imaginary walls and roof. Furniture had to be spirited into it – an old rug, perhaps; a chair; a table. Rituals had to be invented, plots and plans hatched, spies launched, guards posted. A world of intrigue would be created, filled with complexity. The kids

involved were always busy, always terribly concentrated.

Play at school is serious business. I think play is always serious for kids, as well as for adults who have not forgotten how to play. Professional educators are often troubled by play, mostly because kids devote energy and intelligence to play that far exceeds what they put into schoolwork. Occasionally, to make things more palatable, educational psychologists will write about the value play has in "learning" – for example, in learning motor skills, or learning creative problem-solving, or something else with a label that sounds legitimate.

The fact is, play is a big part of life at Sudbury Valley. And it is one of the prime factors of learning here. But what is learned is a different lesson than you might think. What is learned is the ability to concentrate and focus attention unsparingly on the task at hand, without regard for limitations – no tiredness, no rushing, no need to abandon a hot idea in the middle to go on to something else. This "lesson" is retained for life.

Most of the kids at school, especially the younger ones, are too busy playing to eat or rest all day. By late afternoon, they are ready for a huge meal and a good night's sleep. They've worked long and hard.

As elaborate as the play is, the tools and equipment needed are, to understate it, inexpensive.

When we first were preparing to open the school, we spent long hours allocating our small budget to all sorts of "necessary" play equipment, especially for little kids. We started with the usual collection of stuff you can find in nurseries, kindergartens, and child recreation centers.

As the first years unfolded, we watched in disbelief. The equipment lay almost entirely unused. Much of what was handled was put to wholly different uses than those for which it had been intended.

The chief equipment the kids use is the chairs, the tables,



the rooms, the closets, and the outdoors, with its woods and bushes, rocks and secret corners. The primary tool is their imagination.

After twelve years of lying around and occasionally being added to by donations, about threequarters of the play stuff was put into boxes and stored in the attic. There it sits. The attic is dry, so it will probably last a long time up there.

There are some exceptions. Older kids play board games that they bring in from home: "Monopoly," for days at a time. "Risk," a fad that lasted four years, and turned the players into geographers and military strategists. And "Dungeons and Dragons," of course, with each player's elaborate collection of accessories carefully assembled and privately owned. I guess "D & D" was more tolerable to outsiders than most games, since in it people "learned" things – about medieval life, for instance.

We take play seriously here. We wouldn't dream of interfering with it. So it flourishes at all ages. And the graduates who leave school go out into the world knowing how to give their all to whatever they're doing, and still remembering how to laugh and enjoy life as it comes.

## 17

# The Library

I thought we would come to blows over yellow tape.

It was another in a series of long meetings we were having to organize the school library. Paula, who was to be our librarian, was arguing her case with fervor.

"Books for young children have to be marked. They should have yellow tape, to be easily spotted." Paula was an experienced public school librarian, and thought she would like to try her hand at something a little different with us. But old habits are hard to shake off.

"Why do we need it?" I kept asking. "Are we afraid the kids will pick up an adult book by mistake?"

The argument raged. Paula was afraid kids would be discouraged if they accidentally picked up a book they would find too hard. As she saw it, the adult world was a fearful place for youngsters, and school had to shelter them from frustrating or painful encounters with it.

To most of us, the yellow tape was just another symbol of

how grownups patronize children. Another example of how adults misread the ferocious determination in each child to master and conquer the real world.

A vote was finally taken, after months of heavy, high-sounding debate. The yellow badge was defeated. Paula resigned soon after, before school had even opened. She was never to see the library in action.

Well, not really "in action." More like "in inaction." For us, the idea of a library is simple: it is a great passive resource, a reservoir of wisdom there for everyone to dip into when thirsty for knowledge. (The standard metaphors apply in this case.)

What pained us about all the school libraries we had ever seen was their sterility. First of all, we didn't want all the books in a separate room or wing called "library." That had the ring of "morgue" to it: a place apart, where everyone had to be still and whisper, where people moved cautiously and a bit fearfully under the often glassy eye of the librarian. We wanted books to be everywhere, comfortable, cozy, easy to reach, there for casual browsing and not just to be "taken out."

We wanted kids to take books off the shelves. Lots of them. We weren't afraid of messing up the library.

Mostly, though, we wanted a lot of good books. Books people liked and cared about.

For that, we had to come up with a new kind of acquisition policy. The usual method just didn't seem right. We could never quite believe that a person whose interest was books *qua* books would know how to find the really interesting ones written in each and every field of knowledge. We wanted the people who loved each field to find the gems in it.

That's how things were done. It was really quite simple, and very inexpensive. We asked people to donate part of their personal libraries. These were books each person had chosen over the years because they liked them, because they were inter-

esting and useful and special. Sudbury Valley's library was built, and continues to be built, by an army of "experts."

Of course, the books aren't all good. Are any library's? Pick a book, any book, and before long you can generate an argument about its merits as heated as ours on yellow tape. But at least the books we have were read and valued by the people who chose them.

Before long, the school building was filled with books. Year after year, room after room got new shelving to house new acquisitions.

In fact, sometimes we almost drown in an ocean of books. Then we hold book sales.

Sometimes we get donations that are just a bit too much, collections that are a little too esoteric. Like the full set of Massachusetts General Statutes, accompanied by extensive commentaries. With or without yellow tapes, this was hardly browsing (or even heavy reading) material for any of us. Or several beautiful runs of technical scientific journals. We have to find a way to dispose of such items, usually by selling them or giving them away. For the most part, though, we put what we get on the shelves. And the children browse.

Of course, sometimes we buy books, when somebody needs titles we don't have. Then they become a special expenditure.

One day in the mid-'70s, we got a letter in the mail from the State Education Department. In it was a check. It turned out that Uncle Sam, in one of his many munificent attempts to aid education, had decided to give out money to schools all over the country to buy books. I guess Congress figured that books were a good thing and that schools would be better if there were more books on the shelves. The publishers, I am sure, did not oppose the idea.

At any rate, here was our manna from heaven, whether we needed it or not. Our first inclination was to send it back, but that didn't make sense. "Don't look a gift horse . . ." So we used it to help the School Meeting defray special expenditure requests for books. Presidents come and go. Politics swing left and right, back and forth. The checks keep coming.

What about the yellow tape?

Well, we ended up making a few concessions. Books that clearly announced themselves to be meant for little kids were not placed on the top shelf in the most remote room. They were, after all, made physically accessible to little kids without need for a fire ladder.

But no tapes. No chance that someone would find a little child reading an untaped book and say, sternly, "What are you doing with that, young man!"

And no chance that an older student sneaking a look at a pretty "children's book" will be embarrassed by a telltale tape on the spine.

## 18

### Time Enough

There are no bells at Sudbury Valley. No "periods."

The time spent on any activity evolves from within each participant. It's always the amount of time the person wants and needs. It's always the right amount of time.

School opens at 8:30 in the morning, closes at 5:00 in the afternoon. It isn't unusual to see someone go into the dark-room at 9:00, lose track of time, and emerge at 4:00 when the work is done.

Jacob seats himself before the potter's wheel. He is thirteen years old. It is 10:30AM. He gets ready, and starts throwing pots. An hour passes. Two hours. Activities swirl around him. His friends start a game of soccer, without him. Three hours. At 2:15 he rises from the wheel. Today, he has nothing to show for his efforts. Not a single pot satisfied him.

Next day, he tries again. This time, he rises at 1:00, after finishing three specimens he likes.

Thomas and Nathan, aged eleven, begin a game of

Dungeons and Dragons at 9:00. It isn't over by 5:00. Nor by 5:00 the next day. On the third day, they wrap it up at 2:00.

Shirley, nine, curls up in a chair and starts to read a book. She continues at home, and the next three days, until it is finished.

Six year old Cindy and Sharon take off for a walk in the woods. It is a lovely Spring day. They are out four hours.

Dan casts his first line into the pond early one Fall morning. Three years later, he is still fishing.

Time is not a commodity at Sudbury Valley. It is not "used," either poorly or well. It is not "wasted," or "saved."

Time here is a measure of the inner rhythm of life, in all its complexity. As each string of events unfolds, the time appropriate to that string elapses with it.

There is no lunchtime. Or rather, any time is lunchtime, if you're hungry for lunch. Tenthirty, twelve, two-thirty, five. Winnie the Pooh had a wall clock that had long ago stopped at 11:00. For him, ever hungry, eleven o'clock was always "time for a little something," and any time could be eleven o'clock.

Year after year at school, I have watched as each child's growth unfolded according to their own sense of time. I saw children spring forward, and then stay steadily in place for a seeming eternity. I saw people dream, and then ever so slowly drift back to earth.

If students need more time than we give them, they get keys to the school. Some come in early, some stay late, some come on holidays and weekends.

The respect the school shows to private rhythms is inviolate. It guarantees that everyone, "sooner or later," will get in touch with their inner selves. Students are well aware of this respect for private time. They come to depend on it, to cherish it. How often have I heard an older teenager say, "More than

anything, the school gave me the time to find myself."

Intense concentration makes one lose entirely the sense of time. I was struck when I first read about Roentgen's behavior when he discovered, accidentally, the mysteriously penetrating rays soon to be labeled "x-rays." Overwhelmed with excitement and passionate curiosity, this heretofore dull and mundane physicist locked himself in his laboratory, had his meals left outside the door, and emerged seven days later, ready with his earth-shaking report.



The image of the creative genius is always accompanied in our stories and legends by an image of total concentration and utter disregard for time. "That's for geniuses," we say, with admiration. We are all in our own ways creative geniuses. We all have within us that same potential for passionate involvement, the same need to disregard the outer world's clocks and turn our eye to our inner clocks.

Public time at school is as punctual as private time is loose. It's all a matter of respect. When several people make a deal to do something together at an appointed place and time, courtesy demands that they meet their obligations. They must synchronize their times, create a common time for the group.

School Meeting starts every Thursday at 1:00 sharp. Don't come if you don't want to be there, but come on time if you do. Classes meet promptly at the scheduled hour, or they don't meet. Field trips take off at exactly the appointed time, or they stay grounded at school. If a person is late, that person is left behind. There is no place for private rhythm when a deal has been struck with others.

The sense of timelessness at school is a major reason the ages mix well. It just seems so irrelevant to worry about how many days or years have passed since a person was born. Six year olds, teenagers, graduates, teachers, and parents relate freely and openly to each other's essence, which knows nothing of age. They tell of the legendary scientist Niels Bohr who could meet a colleague after ten years of separation and resume the conversation they were having when they had last been together. At Sudbury Valley, that legend is commonplace reality.

At Sudbury Valley, everyone has time.

## 19

# Learning

Sudbury Valley teaches us all one thing more than any other: humility. Every day we confront our ignorance, battle with it, and pay it our respects.

It all started with learning about learning. When we first went into education many years ago, we thought we knew something about how people learn.

I remember clearly my early teaching experience in college. I knew my subject, and I had read books on pedagogy, psychology, and development. I was sitting on top of the world – so "knowledgeable," so able to give so much to my students. . .

Reality came in small doses. First, I found out that all those eager, happy-looking faces sitting before me were masking massive boredom and indifference. Then I found out that they weren't getting most of what I was saying. "Here's an important point," I would intone with majestic emphasis, "and it provides an insight the textbooks don't give." Alas, to no avail. When the exam papers came back, the textbook version, memorized

carefully, was all I ever saw.

I tried harder, read more; my luck did not improve. I found out that my colleagues all grappled with the same problem, to the extent they cared at all. Slowly it dawned on me that students just wouldn't learn what they didn't want to learn, no matter how I cavorted before them, cajoled them, or threatened them. Then I discovered the awful truth, that in fact we really don't know how people learn at all, whether they are or are not interested in what they are learning.

Sometimes, I feel the schools around us are the world's greatest example of the legend of the emperor's new clothes. Year after year, they carry on, calling themselves purveyors of knowledge, providers of education. When all else fails, money is applied as a plaster to heal the wounds.

But it hardly makes a difference. Children will learn what they will learn, when they want and how they want, our best efforts notwithstanding.

At Sudbury Valley, I see this truth in action all the time. I never have been able to unlock the secret of how they really do it.

As a school, we don't make believe we know what we don't know. Our role is to stand by while the children, each and every one, choose their own varied paths. We help when asked. We stand aside when not asked.

And what variety we find in those beautiful minds of theirs! Piaget, eat your heart out. Stages of learning? Universal steps in comprehension? General patterns in the acquisition of knowledge? Nonsense!

No two kids ever take the same path. Few are even remotely similar. Each child is so unique, so exceptional, we watch in awe and are humbled.

The kids are all learning, all the time. Life is their great-

est teacher. The B.A.s and M.A.s and Ph.D.s on the staff are minor actors.

The kids use other kids, books, instruments, and adults as they see fit. Their chief tool is their curiosity, which drives them to find, to master, to understand.

They learn to see the world, because they look, and they are in it. They do not sit boxed in rooms all day.

They learn to relate to people, because they are with people, of all ages, all day.

They learn to solve problems, because they have to. "The buck stops here" said the sign on President Truman's desk, and "here" is each student's own place. There is no one else to bail them out.

Watching the children teaches me something new every day. Consider this, for example. People say, "Let children be free to choose their activities, and they will always take the path of least resistance. They'll never develop character to face hardship." When people tell me that, I always say to myself (and occasionally out loud to them), "What children have you looked at recently?"

That isn't what happens at all with the specimens in vivo. Most of the time, kids choose the path of greatest resistance. No, that wasn't a typographical error. I wrote "the path of greatest resistance" and I meant it.

I don't really know why this happens, but I see it happen all the time. It's as if kids see their weak spots as a challenge that simply must be met.

So the awkward child plays sports all day. The kid with a math phobia studies arithmetic and algebra. The recluse tries mixing, the gregarious one learns to be alone. Each story is a saga of monumental struggle and iron determination.

Then there's the bit about being well-rounded. "You've

got to force them to learn a little about a lot of things. Children need to be exposed at school. If you leave them be, they may become too narrow."

Not a single aspect of this complaint has ever made sense to me. First of all, there's the arrogance of it, as if you or I or some panel of experts could choose out of the vast ocean of human knowledge the right combination of droplets everyone needs to imbibe. Then, there's the naivete, as if children today in this country, in an era of multi-media blitz, aren't exposed day and night to more than we can imagine. The very same people who complain about narrowness can be found the next day complaining about overexposure and overstimulation. Finally, there's the assumption that it's bad to be narrow. Bad for whom? For Mozart? For Einstein? For Wilbur and Orville Wright? Our greatest national heroes are praised for their single-minded devotion to some cause or other. Is that well-rounded?

It all comes back to humility. The smartest of us is just a tiny bit less stupid than the stupidest of us. Leave children be. They will learn all they have to, and more, if we don't mess with them, unless and until they beg us to.

## 20

### Evaluation

One day I was playing catch with a six year old. Each time he threw, and each time he tried to catch, I "encouraged" him: "Good job"; "Nice throw"; "Great try." Suddenly, he threw the ball at me angrily and shouted, "I don't want to play with you any more. You're lying. I threw terribly, it wasn't at all good, and you're a big faker."

Of course he was right. And I was wrong. It was another valuable lesson for me at school.

There are no grades at Sudbury Valley. Students decide for themselves how to measure their progress. For the most part, they apply harsh standards to their own work, sizing it up against the best models they can find in the outside world.

Math students know when they've mastered multiplication and division, and every other operation; they either get the problems right or they don't. If they can't understand something, they either figure it out or ask for help, until they know

that they know. A child who is learning automotive repair realizes quickly that he can fix one thing and not another. The more he can fix, the better a mechanic he becomes; but he needs no outside help to tell him what he can't yet do.

So it goes for every activity. The potter has seen professional pots, the painter has seen paintings, the writer has read books, the actor has seen plays, the musician has heard records or concerts. They each have a measure of excellence in mind, and each can set goals for themselves without illusions.

Often, the process of self-evaluation against perfection is painfully frustrating. Days and weeks of work go out the window when their inadequacies confront their makers. "Why are you tearing up that beautiful picture?" I have asked more than one student. "Because it is ugly," comes the inevitable reply.

The frustration can lead to anger, to fearfully bad moods, to self-castigation. It's no use for anyone else to say, "But you're very good at this," when we really mean, "You're good for your age and for your level of achievement." That is no comfort. The children have decided, before they began, what excellence they wanted to achieve, and your words sound hollow and false.

At times, the frustration caused by brutal self-evaluation leads children to abandon the enterprise. Most of the time, the kids go back and try again, and again, and again, with awesome singleminded determination, until finally they come to you and say, "This is a good piece of work."

Occasionally, children look for outside criticism to help them perfect their work. They seek a critic, and demand honesty and competence. This is what happens in every apprenticeship program: the apprentice is basically applying to the master for training and on-going critique.

It all depends on the kid and on the subject matter. I have had many people approach me and ask, "Could you go over my

writing and help me improve it?" The kids who ask me this are literate and bright, but they just can't put their finger on what they're doing wrong.

When asked, I am glad to oblige. And I let go when the students tell me they are done with me, they have gotten what they want. Every staff member at school acts this way. It's built into the school.

At the heart of Sudbury Valley is the policy that we don't rate people. We don't compare them to each other, or to some standard we have set. For us, such an activity is a violation of the students' right to privacy and to self-determination.

The school is not a judge. If students ask someone to write on their behalf some letter of recommendation, it is a personal matter between the parties. If the person agrees to write such a letter, it is on personal stationery, not the school's. As far as Sudbury Valley is concerned, everyone is "OK."

This policy used to create some funny problems, and sometimes still does. Time and again, standard application forms for advanced schools and jobs ask for high school transcripts and recommendations. We write a polite letter that explains how we operate and tells our policy. We try to break it as gently as possible that we have no grades and issue no evaluations. Nine times out of ten, this policy is accepted, and the students are left where they properly should be, making their own cases with the admissions officers or personnel managers of the places to which they're applying.

The other one time out of ten is what makes life interesting. Sometimes they'll keep sending computerized requests, ignoring a response that doesn't fit the computer's program. When this happens, persistence is the key; we keep trying until we finally hit a human being who can make decisions. Other times we'll get a call from someone who says, "Can't you give us something, maybe an oral evaluation on the phone that no one



will see?" Patiently, we explain that we can't.

As far as we know, our policy on evaluation has never caused harm to any students as they move on to life outside the school. The policy makes things a little harder for them, to be sure. But that kind of hardship is what the school is about: learning to make your own way, set your own standards, meet your own goals. And what we gain at school, as a bonus from our no-grading and no-rating policy, is an atmosphere free of competition among students or battles for adult approval. At Sudbury Valley, people help each other all the time. They have no reason not to.

## 21

# The Lightning Road

Mark Twain tells a wonderful story about a lightning rod salesman, who manages to convince a customer that he should buy a huge number of lightning rods to protect every corner of his home in case of a storm. The first time a thunderstorm occurs, the customer is a prisoner in his house: the lightning rods have attracted to them all the electricity in the heavens from miles around, and the house becomes encased in a solid sheet of electricity.

This cruelly funny fable became a frightening reality to us when we first opened our school. It turned out that Sudbury Valley was a gigantic lightning rod in the stormy skies of education in the later '60s.

It was a time of ferment in American society. A series of major political conflicts had left the country divided, angry, and violent. The schools too were not spared.

Everywhere, new schools sprang up, founded by discontented teachers, or activist parents, or political factions, or occa-

sionally by rebellious older students. Many were labelled "free schools." After a while, all fell under the label "alternative schools," which is still in use today to describe any school outside the mainstream.

Sudbury Valley had not been fashioned in the same forge as these other new schools. We had formulated our philosophy and goals against the broad background of history, learning theory, and the unique American experience. A quirk of fate found us ready to open in the turbulent year of 1968. Another quirk of fate found us the only alternative school in Eastern Massachusetts open to teenagers, and one of a tiny handful of schools for younger children.

For many people, there was no time to split hairs. We were the "alternative" lightning rod. From all over, people flocked to enroll their children, barely hearing what we told them about our program. The result was a predictable disaster. It turned out that most of them were really looking for a variety of progressive school. They wanted a place that offered intense guidance, counseling, and intervention for their children. That was hardly compatible with what we were doing.

For a while, they waited. As did the students. They were convinced that the freedom of choice we offered was just a ruse, a way of enticing children to feel comfortable, to feel free. They were sure that after a few weeks of nondirection, the staff would eventually emerge from their passive roles, put their arms warmly around the children's shoulders, and say gently, "OK, Johnny, you've had weeks to play and sow wild oats; don't you think it's time to settle down and do something productive? Wouldn't you like us to help?"

But that day never came. We stuck to our guns, until it gradually dawned on everyone that we really meant what we said. The children were really going to be free to choose.

There was a furor. Half the parents turned on the school

with the same bitterness that was raging in the political arena. After a month of pitched battles, the school was decimated. We continued our work.

The battle over the school, fought at its birth, effectively dismantled the lightning rods. People now come to us for what we are. Mostly. They don't confuse us as much with what we are not.

A friend once said, "I know the exact difference between you and progressive 'free' schools."

"What is it?" I asked, skeptical that it could be said in a phrase.

"In your school, you're supposed to do what you like; in the others, you're supposed to like what you do."

That said it pretty well.

We have never seen it as our mission to entertain our students, to "inspire" them, to entice them to learn what they "should" be learning. We have never placed good cheer and happiness at the top of our priority list. For us at Sudbury Valley, exposure to reality is more important. For learning and growth, the everyday struggles, disappointments, frustrations, and failures are as essential as – even more essential than – the happiness and contentment sought by others.

These matters are no longer in question, and have not been for years. Everywhere we see the benefits that children reap from being left to choose their way of life.

We are a new kind of lightning rod now; or, perhaps better, a beacon of light to attract those everywhere who wish their children to have the freedom we offer.



## Part II

# Life At School

## The School Meeting

Every Thursday at 1:00 PM sharp the School Meeting is called to order by the chairman. Another session is about to unfold.

The Meeting is the heart of the school. It runs Sudbury Valley. From it and it alone flows all authority in the school's daily life. Matters large and small are dealt with at the Meeting. Some of the most momentous issues in the life of the school have been resolved there.

The school's judicial system was fashioned in 1968 at consecutive meetings lasting over six hours. Eleven years later, long debates led to a restructuring of the system, and six years later yet another change was put into effect. Hours and hours of thought and argument went into these matters.

All severe sentences for offenses are decided there. All judicial matters are reviewed.

Rules of the school are proposed to the School Meeting,

and passed by it. They are collected in the school's Law Book.

Some strange regulations find their way into the code from time to time. Early on, people were dropping papers and trash all over the campus, and we struggled with a way to keep it clean. As the debate went on, it became clear that some people cared a lot more about the problem than others. There was no obvious way to force the slobs to yield to the aesthetic tastes of the fussy ones. Finally, Jack proposed a solution: "Let them that litter, litter; let them that pick up, pick up." *Laissez-faire* at its extreme. A weary meeting adopted the aphorism, and the rule stayed on the books for two years until the slobs gave in.

School Corporations are chartered by the School Meeting. Staff contracts are negotiated by it. Special expenditures are appropriated there. Private concessions are granted, or revoked, on the Meeting floor.

You never know what will suddenly develop into an endless debate. Some momentous issues pass by in fifteen minutes. Other matters you might think are trivial hold the Meeting's attention for hours on end.

When Dennis wanted to set up a concession to sell lead pencils for a dime each (the school to get its usual 10% cut of the profits, of course), the debate suddenly flared. The school already had a pencil dispenser for 25 cents each, and we had a five year supply of pencils. How could the School Meeting charter a concession to compete with itself?

Great principles were invoked. Free trade, protectionism, the entire history of the school's pencil dispenser, all were gone over thoroughly before the issue could be resolved. No one could have guessed in advance that the matter would involve us in any discussion at all!

Every student, regardless of age, has a vote at the Meeting. So does every staff member. Since students outnumber staff by

seven to one or more, they effectively control the school.

When we first set up the school, we had a problem putting the School Meeting into the legal structure. Under Massachusetts law, minors couldn't have the same powers as adults. I still remember our attorneys, two supportive, warm, distinguished men, each with a long record of public service, pacing back and forth, muttering, "You're going to have four year olds and eight year olds and twelve year olds vote on the same issues as adults?!" It just didn't make sense to them. But their creative minds devised a way to do it.

Everyone votes, if they come. Attendance is optional. There are no proxies. So what happens at school is just what happens everywhere else in a free democracy: when an issue is dear to some-one's hearts, that person comes. Otherwise, they usually don't bother.

After a while, you can guess at the agenda by looking at who is there. When a bunch of athletic youngsters suddenly show up en bloc, it's a good bet we're going to be asked for a special expenditure to buy some new sports equipment. When three twelve year olds appear out of the blue, a concession is in the wind. There are some regulars of all ages, of course, who like being involved in running the school, just as there are in every town.

You don't have to guess at the agenda from who is there. The agenda is printed in advance every week, as *The School Meeting Record*, a practice that began soon after the school opened. This way, everyone is forewarned about what is on tap.

The School Meeting operates under formal rules of procedure. The Chairman learns the rules, and amateur parliamentarians on the floor of the Meeting help out in a pinch. People speak only when recognized by the Chair; they address the chair; there is complete quiet and decorum (except when there isn't, and the Chairman has to intervene). Virtually all decision are

made by simple majority vote. Every important motion put before the meeting needs at least two readings at two successive meetings, to give people a chance to think things over.

After the first few years, the Chairman has almost always been a student, elected for a year term at one of the early meetings of the school year.

The School Meeting runs smoothly and conducts a staggering amount of business in a short time. Meetings rarely run over two hours, which is not a lot of time per week to run the school. When we first opened, we were often attacked harshly by outsiders for the strict formality of the meetings. "They should be warmer, more give-and-take, more of an opportunity to vent feelings." Some people were offended by majority rule; they thought everything should happen by consensus, after a hearty round of emotional bonding.

Sudbury Valley has never regretted its choice to stick with democratic procedures that go back to ancient Greek times. Hands-on democracy works well for us here, and we are proud of it.



## 23

# Hazards

The first time a twelve year old climbed to the top of the beech tree, our hearts stopped. There he was, calling to us proudly from seventy feet up, not quite visible through the foliage. And there we were on the ground below, with images of disaster fleeting through our minds.

The beech tree started the first of many long discussions about hazards on campus. The more we thought about it, the more hazards we discovered. Those that we missed, the children found.

Every child is free to go wherever they wish, whenever they want. Ours is an open campus. Our fate is to worry.

In the beginning, we were naive and innocent. "We have an open campus," we said, fully understanding that this meant kids could go off campus at any time. How we had hated the prisonlike confinement of school when we were young! School and prison had nothing in common as far as we were con-

cerned. At Sudbury Valley, we opened the doors and threw away the keys.

We were pleased, for a few months. Then one day we found a couple of eight year olds blithely walking down the road, headed towards the pizzeria a mile away at Nobscot Corner. Eight year olds on the road! We were paralyzed with fear.

It even took the police a few years to get used to us. We would routinely get calls from officers who reported they had discovered our "runaways."

Then came "the rocks," that beautiful corner of the campus strewn by Nature with large boulders. How pretty they looked – until the five and six year olds decided to go in for rock-climbing. How ominous they suddenly appeared!

The brook was the next to force its attention upon us. Tiny and shallow, it meandered off our property, from the base of the mill dam. Baiting Brook it is called, a typical little country rill, beautiful and enticing.

We had no idea how many ways this innocent waterway could be threatening. The rocks that lined its bed were slithery and unstable. There were tiny pools hidden here and there, some about two feet deep, where a four year old could manage to get wet up to the neck.

In fact, it didn't take us long to realize that, looked at from an appropriate perspective, just about anything in the environment can be dangerous. Trees, rocks, porches, roads, streams. Even our seemingly gorgeous lawn had gopher holes that lured the unwary to twist their ankles.

We knew how we felt about these hazards, but we had to keep reminding ourselves from time to time. Central to the school is the idea that kids could learn judgment only by coping with real-world problems. We feel the only way children can become responsible persons is to be responsible for their own

welfare, for their own education, and for their own destiny.

Like every other high principle, this one was put to the test early. By the campus hazards.

We have talked about these matters for hours and hours, even though we know we have to stick to our principles. Mainly, it is a matter of the older people at school holding each other's hands for comfort.

As it turns out, the daily dangers are challenges to the children, to be met with patient determination, concentration, and, most of all, care. People are naturally protective of their welfare, not self-destructive. The real danger lies in placing a web of restrictions around people. The restrictions become challenges in themselves, and breaking them becomes such a high priority that even personal safety can be ignored.

So we let things take their course. We have had our share of small cuts and bruises. Some of them get washed and covered with bandaids, and the kids go right back to where they were for another shot. Most of them don't even get looked at. They are the routine physical scars of everyday life, and the kids are usually too busy to pay them any attention at all. The most serious accident we ever had was when an eight year old came down the play slide the wrong way and bumped her shoulder hard.

We do draw one line, an invisible one, where the community and public laws have drawn one as well: at the shore of the pond. Bodies of water are considered public hazards by everyone. The dangers they contain are usually hidden, and there is rarely a second chance to learn from mistakes. And as a practical matter, neither common sense nor our insurance would tolerate free access to the pond.

So the School Meeting passed a strict rule forbidding anyone ever to enter the pond, even to wet their toes, except under controlled conditions. The same went for going on it in the

winter, when it is covered with ice.

The matter was aired and debated, and agreed on by a unanimous vote. The pond restriction has never been challenged, either on the floor of the School Meeting or in practice. Over the years, a handful of little kids have been cited for getting their feet wet. No one has gone into the water or on the ice when not permitted.

There is no fence around the pond.

The beech tree still beckons every year to new generations of students. Every year, a new group conquers the heights, and passes on the secrets of its success to the next comers.

Nobscot pizza, like the police, has gotten used to our youngsters popping in. The neighbors have grown accustomed to wanderers of all ages drifting by.

Dealing with daily hazards is an important part of what the children learn here. At Sudbury Valley, they live in the real world, unconfined.



## 24

# The Honor System

The pond is not the only part of school that runs on the honor system. The whole school does.

Take, for example, locks. At Sudbury Valley, we are allergic to locks. There is a tradition going back to the earliest days that we don't want locks anywhere in the school.

Everyone has their own personal drawer to keep things in at school. The drawers are private nests, in which all sorts of treasures are squirreled away. The drawers are off limits to all but the owners. They have no locks.

Rarely is anything missing from a drawer. Occasionally, someone is caught peering into another person's drawer, and is brought before the bar of justice.

Respect for the privacy of personal cubbies has led to some amusing dilemmas. There is a rule that no one may keep fresh food in a drawer. It has happened that our noses have told us unmistakably that this rule was being ignored. Once this happened when the owner was away.





Students keep their own attendance records  
on the posted check-in list.

What to do? Great soul searching began. Should we open the drawer and take out the food? The argument raged for days, until our noses and the fear of mice settled the issue. The drawer was opened and the offending foodstuff removed.

The honor system is so ingrained that no one thinks about it any more. Purses, wallets, valuables are regularly left exposed. They are rarely touched.

When someone breaks the code, reaction is swift. The person finds that such behavior is universally condemned.

The feeling of trust and respect goes deeper than any of us ever dreamt, and every sort of person responds to it. An occasional kid on probation for stealing, teenagers who are known to break a law or two, protect the school's honor ferociously. We once had a seventeen-year-old whom we learned had served time for car theft. It turned out that, at school, no one was more trustworthy.

But the heart of the honor system is the idea of certification, which underlies hundreds of activities.

The school is full of tools and equipment that require special training. In the darkroom, in the office, in the computer room, in the kitchen, in the shop, in the arts and crafts rooms, all over. The School Meeting has one simple rule for all: anyone may use equipment if they have learned how. Once they know, they are "certified" for the object in question, and they can use it at will.

Experts do the certifying, and also certify other experts. Lists of certified people are posted, for all to see. This system applies even to the most hazardous tools. The greater the danger, the more elaborate the certification procedure; but it is the same for everyone, regardless of age.

This means some mighty young people may end up using some mighty sophisticated equipment. Like an eleven year old on

his own in the darkroom. Or a twelve year old in the shop. Or a nine year old in the kitchen. No one is more careful than these youngsters, who are bent on proving they can match adults at their own games. And since everything is open to certification, no one has to sneak in and use a tempting "forbidden fruit."

Once in a while, we are in a real bind.

When we got our computer, it seemed terribly vulnerable in our eyes. We just couldn't face standing by helpless, worrying whether it would be carted off in the middle of the night. There just didn't seem to be any way to avoid locking up the computer in a closet overnight. A lock in school!

The discussions would have warmed the heart of any scholar of the arcane. The school was locked every night, wasn't it? The locks on the school doors were not locks in school, but locks against the outside world who had no business with us. The lock on the computer closet, too, was not really in school; it just looked that way. It was really . . . an inside lock directed at outside people.

We installed our lock. Everyone cringed when they passed it. Within the school, anyone certified for the computer had access to the key.

After a few months, no one could stand it any longer. By an overwhelming majority, the School Meeting appropriated a few hundred dollars of its precious funds to buy a security system that firmly plants the computer at its desk.

With great joy, the lock on the closet was removed.

Over the years, there has been very little theft, very little vandalism, very little internal disrespect. Our century-old building, which could so easily have been destroyed after years of abuse, looks better by far today than when we first opened.

And the universal honor system helps maintain an atmosphere of trust and personal dignity that permeates the school.

## 25

### The Sporting Scene

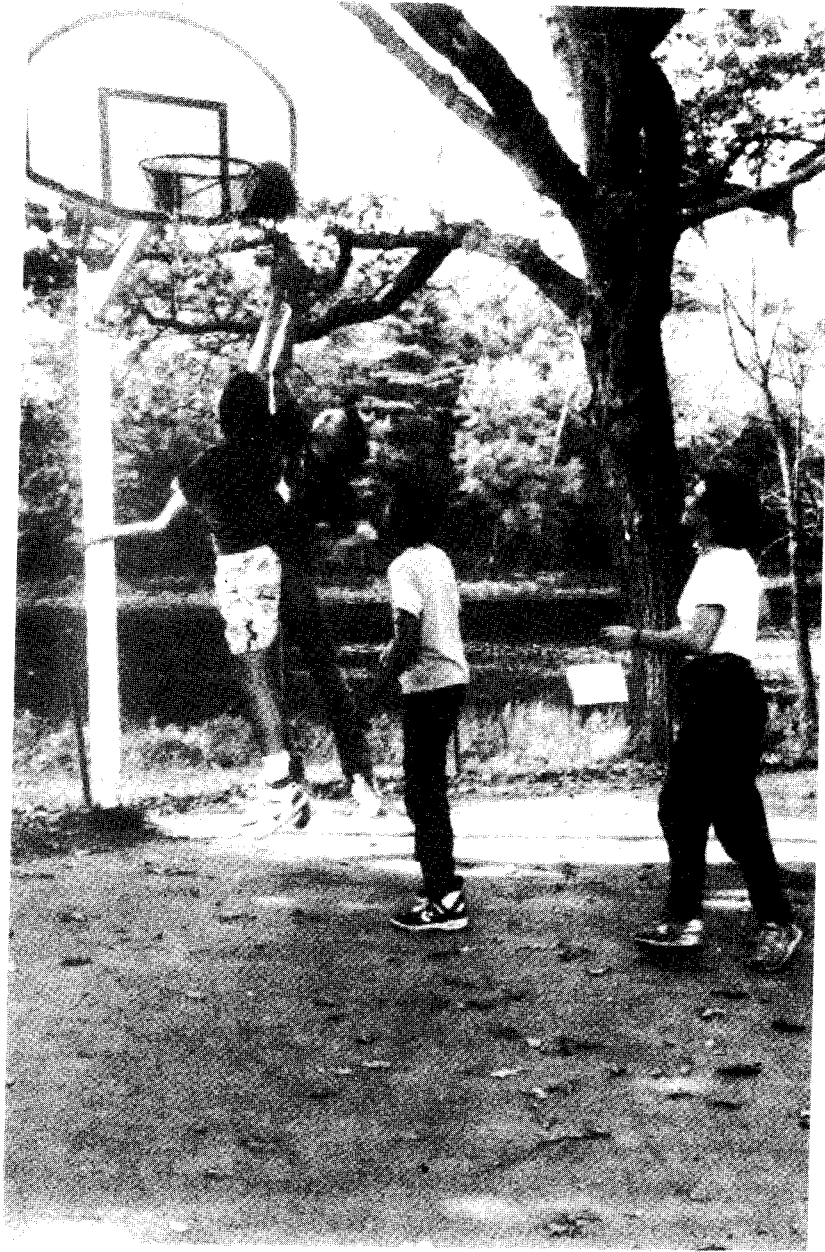
It is a sunny day in September. The school building is all but deserted.

I look out through the windows of the great doors in the sewing room. Everyone is gathered on the lawn, where a huge game of Capture the Flag is going on. With much shouting and laughter, kids are running back and forth across the field.

An hour later the game is over. In ones, twos, and threes, the players come wandering back into the building, thirsty, hungry, and buoyant.

The highlights of the game are relived in animated conversation. No one seems to have lost. It looks like a game in which both teams won.

The scene repeats itself all year round. From early Fall through Winter, Spring, and early Summer, football, soccer, sledding, ice hockey, basketball, and baseball take turns occupying



the fields. Where equipment is missing, such as goal posts, makeshift replacements are thrown together.

Regardless of the name of the game, the basic rule is always the same: everyone who wants to, plays. Regardless of age or ability or number.

A baseball team can end up having five players, or fifteen. There can be six year olds and sixteen year olds side by side. Boys and girls are equally eligible.

Watch closely, and you can see some remarkable scenes.

An awkward eight year old comes to bat. There are men on base. His teammates are strewn around home plate, shouting encouragement. He swings. The ball dribbles along the ground, between the pitcher and third base. He scrambles, beats the throw, is safe at first. Great joy.

The next batter is the team's star, a huge eighteen year old. He hits a long fly ball to the crowded outfield. It is right at a twelve year old, who waits for the ball to come down – and drops it. No one says a word. Two runs score.

The game goes on, inning after inning. Kids make hits, strike out, make errors, do brilliant feats. You can hardly tell the difference from their demeanor. The score? Only a couple of people are keeping track. It's something like 10-1.

After an hour and a half, the game ends by general consent. No one is moping. There are no recriminations.

Then the great truth suddenly dawns: people have been having fun. They have been enjoying the game.

And enjoy it they do, boys and girls, large and small, old and young, good and bad.

There is an air of lusty excitement, bustling activity, life. Always, always, there is laughter.

Not only in baseball, of course. In all the competitive sports. The goals seem to be physical activity, being outside, and a good time.

One Fall day Mimsy, one of the school's founding staff members, woke up to the fact that tackle football had been played for fifteen years without any protective equipment. She was shocked and disturbed. It seemed terribly irresponsible. Every year the papers were full of stories about massive injuries to children in high school football games. Some public schools had even dropped the sport.

Mimsy put a motion in the School Meeting Record asking to ban tackle football from school.

It was one of the best attended meetings in the history of the school. The debate was sober, carefully thought out. Most of the talking was done by people who actually played football. Slowly, what really happens on the playing field came into focus for all of us.

"There has never been an injury at Sudbury Valley in contact sports," said one burly teenager, "because we are careful not to hurt anyone. It's part of the game. We are aware of it all the time. It just isn't done."

"A game of tackle football," said another, "is less dangerous than walking on the road to the State Park."

The little kids agreed, without exception. Not one of them had ever been roughed up.

The motion had two readings, two debates, like every other important motion. It failed by an overwhelming majority. I'm not even sure Mimsy still supported it when it finally came to a vote.

The next day, I watched a game of basketball closely, more closely than I ever had before. Six footers and pint-sized midgets were playing together on the court, a converted asphalt parking area. Basketball can be a physical sport. This game was, but in a way typical of the school.

Big kids jolted big kids, but never seemed to touch the little ones. The little ones jolted each other, and did their best to push around the big ones; like gnats on an elephant. No one squished the gnats. Ever.

In Sudbury Valley sports, the play's the thing. And everyone comes out a winner.

## 26

## Camping

The great outdoors has always been at least as important at school as the indoors. Even a casual visitor can see this, on the children's faces, in their bodies, their movements, their physical freedom.

One Fall day, many years ago, some of us thought, "Why not take the next step? How about a camping trip, to the White Mountains in New Hampshire, where we can spend the whole time outdoors?" We posted a notice on the bulletin board. Interested parties were asked to sign up.

Quickly, a list of thirty kids formed. We borrowed a bunch of large tents, organized a fleet of staff cars, and put together the trip. Everyone got lists of what to bring. A charge was assessed on each person to cover group expenses.

On October 10, we set off for Franconia State Park. Spirits were high. When we arrived, we found the campgrounds empty. Mid-week camping in October is not generally the rage.

We set up camp, and hiked to the top of a small moun-

tain. The view was exhilarating. Back down, we lit the fires, cooked dinner, told ghost stories, and finally went to sleep, weary and happy.

That night, it snowed. And snowed. And snowed. The storm was a local squall, that struck only a few mountain locations. We were one of them.

At 3:00AM, with about four inches of snow blanketing the camp, one of the tents collapsed on the campers inside. Great commotion. It took an hour to relocate everyone and settle down. We were freezing cold.

That morning, a bedraggled group huddled in the main campground lodge, thawing out by a fire. Breakfast was cold, everything was wet and frozen.

We broke camp quickly and high-tailed back home. It was ten years before we tried another Fall camping trip, ever so tentatively, to Mount Monadnock – closer, easier to come home from, one night only.

With such an inauspicious start, were the outdoorsmen at school fazed? Not on your life! It was all a matter of season. That Spring, the agitation began early for another camping trip, this time four days long. It seems everyone's memories of Franconia by then had become rosetinted. "That was a great adventure," the kids said, to a dubious staff.

So we planned another trip – late in June, and southward, to Cape Cod. Nickerson State Park was our target. No snow there in June, ever.

The trip was a huge success. We swam in the lake, walked in the woods, went to the ocean beach, visited the dunes, toured Provincetown.

A new school tradition was established. Every June a week is spent on Cape Cod. Whoever wants to, comes, if they can handle being away from home in tents and taking care of themselves. We go rain or shine, because no one seems to mind

if it rains. The bathing suits just get wet a little faster, and there's no danger of sunburn.

Early on, a Camping and Touring Corporation was set up, to organize camping trips and think up other outings. Of course, there had to be arguments. Especially about the camping trips.

It all started after the first trip to Cape Cod. "You call that camping?" asked Marge, outraged. "That was more like living in a posh resort hotel. It could have been Miami Beach. Swimming, touring, hot showers, elaborate hot meals, sitting around. What's 'camping' about that?"

Well, it turned out most everybody hadn't meant "camping," really, in the first place. What people had in mind was sort of a nice outdoor vacation.

The purists were enraged and offended. On second thought, they decided to come along next year anyway. Just in case it might be fun. The trip remained what it had been.

It remained what it had been, and multiplied. After we recovered from Franconia, a Fall version was added, to Monadnock, to start off the school year on the right foot. And, several years after that, a winter week of skiing at Killington, Vermont came into being. No tents on that one. But we did sleep in sleeping bags.

The purists had their day, too. They got together and organized warm weather backpacking trips into the mountains, and cross-country ski outings in the dead of winter. Small trips, for the hardy few outdoorsmen who really cared. Infrequent trips, to be sure. But they went whenever they wanted to, whenever they could get organized to pull it off.

It didn't take long for Marge to reconcile herself to the regular trips. After all, everyone was outdoors on the regular trips, and that was worth something. And people had a grand time,

and learned to see to their basic needs.

Before long, she got into the swing of things. "Why not offer an overnight stay in tents on the school campus for little children, who feel so left out because they're not grown up enough to go away for a week?" she proposed. It was an inspired idea. The young kids signed up en masse.

So it came to be that every year, in early June, there is a one-night campout at school for those too young to go to the Cape. Soon, the kids get used to camping, Sudbury Valley style. Before long, they are old enough to go away with the others.

And Marge doesn't really mind any more. She figures at least she has helped increase the odds that maybe some of the little ones will become real outdoorsmen in later years.



## Committees and Clerks

The nitty-gritty of everyday school administration is farmed out by the School Meeting to people called "Clerks," and occasionally to a committee. They are elected once a year, when school begins in the Fall.

The last thing on earth we ever wanted was an entrenched bureaucracy, steadily growing until it has smothered everything in sight. So we set about our business in a typically Sudbury Valley style. When routine tasks came up that needed doing, the School Meeting defined them, made a job description, and then elected someone to fill the job. No one permanent, mind you, but one of us – student or staff – who would take a turn for a year.

Do the phone messages need to be monitored? The mail taken care of? Office supplies provided? Files kept in order? We created an Office Clerk to do the job. The physical plant has to be maintained? We have a Buildings Maintenance Clerk to look after the buildings, a Grounds Clerk for the grounds.

For larger jobs, where lots of hands or lots of opinions are needed, there are committees: one for the school's bookkeeping, one for interior design, and one for public relations.

Clerkships come and go, as jobs redefine themselves, lose their importance, or emerge. Few things give me more satisfaction than participating in a School Meeting that abolishes a clerkship. It's a reaffirmation of our commitment not to yield to bureaucracy.

For instance, there used to be an Opening and Closing Clerk, to make sure there was someone to open school properly every day, and close properly every evening. The job of having a supply of keys for the school was also given to that Clerk. A few years passed. Checklists for opening and closing were developed, also a simple key monitoring system; very simple, basically just a list of who has what. There wasn't really much of a job left, so the Clerkship disappeared and the routines were added to someone else's job description.

There used to be a Visitor's Clerk, to handle the steady stream of people who come to see the school. For years, that was quite a job. We had to figure out how to be as open as possible to outsiders, without becoming preoccupied with them. Once the successive Clerks worked it out, their job became easy, too easy. The routines were handed over to the Public Relations Committee and the Clerkship abolished.

New jobs come on the horizon, too. After a number of years, we realized there were a lot of alumni out there who wanted to stay in touch. Many of them would drop in and visit, to our delight. It finally penetrated our consciousness that we ought to try to make things a little easier for former students and the school to communicate with each other. The School Meeting settled on an Alumni Clerk to do the job.

Actually, this is a good example of how a principle can be

taken to excess. It was at least five years before we created a formal School Meeting official to deal with alumni. Before that, we kept trying to handle matters informally, or semi-formally by asking someone to do it without a title. When several alumni formed an organization, Friends of Sudbury Valley, to handle their end of the contact, we waited skeptically a few years to see if they would keep it up. Finally, after a long period of trial and gestation, we yielded and created an official contact person. No Parkinson's Law for us!

Then there are the rare times we have to split a Clerkship into two. We hate doing that, but now and then we have to choose between splitting the Clerkship or tearing apart the Clerk.

For the longest time, we had an Enrollment Clerk who took care of everything that had to do with enrolling a student. The Clerk was responsible for interviews, for paperwork, and for getting the tuition. It was all one process, we thought.

Not quite. The Clerk soon found that out. As the interviewer for admissions, she became the first contact new people had with the school. More often than not, new students and parents continued to use her as a friend, a sounding board for problems, anxieties, questions.

But when money comes into play, everything changes.

Nothing splits friendships more quickly or thoroughly than a spat about money. One day, two people walk arm in arm, comrades in life. They fight over a bill, and the next day, likely as not, they are mortal enemies.

As the person who had to see to it that the tuition payments came in, the Enrollment Clerk was an open target. The friendly students and parents of yesterday could easily become the mortal enemies of today. It took so little. Most of the time, all it took was a reminder that money was due. "Money? You're hounding me for money? What a cad you are! We thought you



were nice, understanding. We know better now."

It took eighteen years and a Clerk whose steel nerves had finally frayed to the breaking point, but finally the light dawned. We eliminated the Enrollment Clerk, and created an Admissions Clerk and a Registrar. The Admissions Clerk can now be the permanent nice guy. The Registrar? Well, the Registrar can choose between aspirins and early retirement . . .

Then there was the saga of the Cleaning Clerk. That deserves a chapter to itself.

## 28

# Cleaning

Over the years, no mundane problem has occupied the school more than cleaning.

From the beginning, we felt it right to be responsible for our own cleanliness. It was a matter of taste. The school was our "nest," and if we fouled it, we felt we should set it in order.

The only people around during the first months were the staff, who were setting up the school. That meant that the staff, among other duties, cleaned regularly.

When we first opened, we couldn't expect the students to get right into the swing of things. Time was needed until everyone settled in and got the idea of what Sudbury Valley was all about. That meant that staff continued to clean regularly.

I mean "regularly." Every evening, after school closing, we got the brooms and dustpans and mops and pails and did the school from one end to the other, and we picked up any litter on the grounds. This seemingly innocent activity, of which we were rather proud, led to the first big controversy on the subject.



Many parents of those first "lightning rod" days were academicians from the many distinguished colleges and universities in the area. They were proud of their profession. Being a teacher was a noble pursuit in their eyes.

Too noble to wield a mop.

"You are debasing yourselves before the students. By doing the cleaning, you are lowering the value of intellectual activity in the children's eyes," said one.

"You are serving as poor models to the kids," said another. "They should be inspired by your example. We don't want our children to grow up to be janitors."

"No wonder you don't spend more time teaching our children," said others, who were decidedly impatient with our philosophy of student-initiated learning. "You spend too much of your time doing menial cleaning."

What was their suggestion for cleaning, we wondered. They surely weren't going to volunteer the parents' services for the job. . . And they knew we had no money to pay hired help.

It wasn't long before we found out what they had in mind. Many of our parents were active in the tumultuous politics of the '60s. Among their noble causes was that of improving the lot of underprivileged minorities. Their experiences in that campaign provided their proposed solution to our problem.

One of their leaders showed up one day, agitated and determined, at a School Meeting. "I have the solution to the cleaning problem," she said, "one that will benefit everyone. The staff has to stop being menial help. We don't have any poor minority students here," she continued. "We can kill two birds with one stone. Offer innercity children full tuition scholarships, and in return they can do the cleaning."

The meeting was in an uproar.

The staff continued to clean, more determined than ever. The protesting parents soon left the school in disgust.

That was just the first of our debates. After a few months, the staff felt it was time for the whole school to pitch in. The era of staff modeling was to give way to community involvement by students and staff alike.

We tried to set up a volunteer system, with a Cleaning Clerk to coordinate the activity and buy the necessary supplies. It is a big building we have to care for, so there's lots of cleaning activity to coordinate.

The Clerk struggled valiantly for a few years. Some volunteers came forward, struggled with their tasks for a while, then drifted away. Cleaning went from once a day to once a week.

Soon, only a handful of stalwart staff and students found themselves doing the whole job every week. "Let them that litter, litter; let them that clean up, clean up," Jack had said. His views were prevailing with a vengeance.

So a new debate began in the School Meeting. When all else fails, what do democracies end up doing to cover essential services? They institute a draft. Sudbury Valley argued and debated, until finally, in despair, we set up a compulsory cleaning system. Everyone, regardless of age, would have to serve a term doing the work.

The Cleaning Clerks now had a doubly difficult job: first, they had to organize the work; second, they had to get satisfactory results out of conscripted workers. Draftees are, after all, notorious gold-brickers. Ours were no exception to the rule.

A few years went by. A few Clerks burned out. The school looked dirty.

Back to the drawing board for cleaning. By now Harry, one of the school's ardent idealists in the early years, had made a cause out of abolishing the forced cleaning levee.

"We want honest work to be done," he argued, "then we should pay honest wages for it. Let's organize a system of hired

cleaners within the school. There will be enough students who need extra money."

To many people, the idea just didn't seem right. Why should the community pay for a job that everyone should be more than willing to do? But all else had failed. Harry's idea passed the School Meeting, and he was elected Cleaning Clerk to carry it out, with a small but adequate budget.

He threw himself into his job with gusto. Soon Harry's Cleaning Service sported an "office" (a desk in the corner of one of the rooms), an elaborate bookkeeping system (he gave each person formal paper chits for work done, complete with approvals and validations), a complex scheduling of tasks, and a training service.

The training service was his pride and joy. He himself had more than once earned his keep working with professional cleaning crews, and he had picked up many tricks of the trade. Each new "employee" of his would have to undergo carefully supervised training sessions before being hired to sweep or mop.

It was a great experiment. The only trouble was that it didn't work.

Draftees aren't the only ones who sometimes fall down on the job. Hired help doing boring routine work with no particular motivation don't always give 100% either. . .

The school gradually got dirty again. Back to the drawing board.

In the end, everyone felt more than a little ashamed that things had come to such a pass. After all, it was everybody's school, and we all felt we should just plain pitch in and keep it clean.

There have been ups and downs, each accompanied by hours of debate and soul-searching on the School Meeting floor. In the end, people come away with renewed spirit and resolve to maintain our self-dignity.

By now, the volunteer system is an ingrained tradition. For occasional heavy cleaning, we have special weekend cleanups, to which parents are invited. Many of them show up regularly. Even the academicians come nowadays. Times change.

Clerkships change, too. The School Meeting abolished the post of Cleaning Clerk. It wasn't a popular office to fill.

Instead, the job of organizing volunteer cleaning was given to the Committee on Aesthetics and School Use. It sounds so much more appropriate and elegant!



## 29

### The Miracle Budget

Cleaning wasn't all we didn't have money for. Empty coffers have been Sudbury Valley's stock-in-trade from the beginning.

When we first set about to put our ideas into practice, back in 1966, we asked knowledgeable people in education, "How much money do you think we need to start a school?" "A minimum of \$250,000," came the answer. That was the lowest answer we got. As far as we were concerned, it might as well have been \$250,000,000.

The founders had available, through personal credit stretched to its limit, a grand total of \$40,000 for everything. We were determined to make it do.

A year's search came up with the ten acre campus and buildings of the century-old Nathaniel Bowditch estate for \$80,000, with only \$20,000 down and the rest mortgaged. That took care of our major need, and of half our funds. The rest of the money was spent on fixing up the main building, bring it up

to the building code standards, furnishing it, buying supplies, and promoting the school. By opening, we were all but broke.

You might wonder how our campus was bought at so reasonable a price. We wondered mightily, but all our inspections came up clean.

A few months after we took possession, we found out why. The campus came complete with pond and earthen mill dam – and the dam had recently been condemned by the Corps of Engineers! According to the deed, as owners, we had to fix the dam. The prior owners had unloaded the property to avoid doing this.

The best estimate we had for repair was \$50,000. Our enterprise looked doomed, until our good friend Mal Stalker, one of Framingham's most distinguished contractors at the time, said, "I'll bring my own men down and we will do the job for a few thousand." Mal was as good as his word. Four thousand dollars did the job. We were eternally grateful – and in debt.

Needless to say, such beginnings impressed on us the need for frugality and budgetary restraint. No expenditure, however small, escaped our careful review. We learned quickly how few things we really needed, how to get good buys, how to find used equipment, and how to get lots of stuff free. Most of all, we learned how to do without, and how to substitute. Mother necessity has always been profligate with her inventions at Sudbury Valley.

The situation was made even more complicated by our ideology. For starters, even though (or perhaps because) several of us had been successful "grantsmen" before we started working on the school, we were determined to make it on our own, without any government or foundation subsidy. We would accept gifts if freely offered, but our aim was to make a go of it on tuition income alone.

As if that wasn't enough, we were determined to show the world we could succeed without being an exclusive, high-priced private school for the economically privileged classes. That meant keeping the tuition quite low, as a matter of principle. For a suitable level of tuition, we looked at public school per-pupil costs, and decided to stay at or below that level. That way, the cost of sending children to Sudbury Valley would be no greater than the cost of sending them to the local public schools. If we succeeded, we reasoned, then the public schools would see that what we were doing was not out of reach for them, too.

So we started out undercapitalized, unsubsidized, and with an artificially depressed income.

Every year, the School Meeting worked on the annual budget, starting in early Spring. The procedure was simple and thorough. It is called "zero-based budgeting" in financial lingo. Each Clerk, Committee, and Corporation carefully examined all their activities from scratch, and decided what they wanted to do the next year. Then they figured out how much it would cost, and submitted their proposals to the School Meeting.

The proposals were then reviewed carefully in several budget meetings. Rarely were requests increased on the floor of the meeting. After a few years of practice, it also became rare that requests were cut.

The entire procedure takes about six weeks, and for some time now has run without a hitch. The results are spectacular.

For example, in the fifteen year period 1969-1984, the cost of living index in the United States almost tripled. Average school costs nationwide went up about fourfold.

At Sudbury Valley, in the same period, the operating budget less than doubled, as did the tuition. As time went on, our tuition rates slid ever farther below the per-pupil costs in public schools. They averaged one third the tuition costs in private schools.

The School Meeting has a stern gaze perpetually turned on all expenditure requests. One example may shed some light on what that means in practice.

The school is a huge old stone mansion heated by an oil-fired hot-water system. Keeping heating costs down has always been a top priority.

The 1969-1984 period is instructive. Because of OPEC, the various oil embargoes, and sundry energy crises, the price of heating oil rose over sixfold in that period. For us, that meant a never-ending search for ways to keep heating costs down.

We lowered the thermostats from 70° to 65°, as everyone else was supposed to do, then to 63° when we found we were all adequately comfortable at that level. (We are, after all, hardy New Englanders, most of us.)

We cut vacations in warm weather and closed school two weeks in the Christmas-New Year period and one week in February.

We bought automatic thermostats that turned the temperature down every night and on weekends.

We insulated. And insulated more.

We bought a state-of-the-art energy-efficient oil burner. And kept the system serviced always.

As a result of all this, during the fifteen year period in question, our oil bills just a bit more than doubled.

The story repeats itself with routine regularity in every area of expenditure.

It's not that we never spend money. We spend what we need to, and we never hesitate to spend money in order to save money.

When we first opened, people told us, "You may possibly succeed in running a democratic school as far as discipline and program goes, but the fiscal part will never work. Give everyone a vote on the money, and you'll be broke in no time."

How wrong they were. Everyone, old and young, has the same determination to see the school succeed and be financially stable each year and for years to come. I can't think of any other matter on which people at school are more in agreement.

Every tradition has its legends of miraculous beneficence. Religions, ancient histories, children's fairy tales, all tell of wants satisfied by copious plenty appearing magically out of the lanterns, caves, stones, and other such unlikely sources.

At Sudbury Valley, we too have a tradition. Every year, we witness the appearance of a miracle budget, in which all our needs are met by whatever resources happen to be at hand.

But the greatest miracle of all has been the staff.

## 30

## The Staff

Twelve people worked full time without pay during the first school year. Twelve people, not one or two.

Most of us had not known each other before that year. We were not comrades in a political movement, or companions in a social community. What brought us together was our common devotion to the educational ideals of the school.

The earliest founders had announced the idea of Sudbury Valley to the community in 1967. Over one hundred adults from all walks of life had been moved by the announcement to come forth and explore the idea of working at the school.

A dozen stayed the year. There was never any doubt in our minds, from the outset, that there would be no money at all available for salaries.

During that first year, patterns were set for the staff that have endured ever since.

First was the very name for the group, "the staff." We

talked about this at length. Schools have teachers, administrators, maintenance personnel, secretaries, janitors, and so forth. There is a plethora of titles, and a grand pecking order in the world of education.

We were completely united in rejecting the standard organization chart. As far as we were concerned, there was one and only one job description: "Wanted: People who are committed to the concept of Sudbury Valley School and who will do whatever has to be done to make that concept work." That covered it all. We were the school's "staff," one and all, indistinguishable in our basic function.

There were no clocks to punch. We came early, stayed until school closed and then finished whatever had to be done. In the beginning, we had a staff meeting every evening to discuss the day's problems and our ability to respond to them. Later, we met when we had to, once or twice a week, then once or twice a month.

We cleaned, to model for the students who later were to join in. We were purchasing agents, carpenters, grounds crew, executive secretaries, lecturers, tutors. Anything and everything.

We learned how not to "give" to students unless asked. We learned to lay back and not interfere with the internal growth of each student, whatever their ages or stages of development. That was the hardest lesson, the one that required most self-discipline, and still does for new staff members. Here's how one of the founders, Hanna Greenberg, has described it:

## THE ART OF DOING NOTHING

"Where do you work?"

"At Sudbury Valley School."

"What do you do?"

"Nothing."

Doing nothing at Sudbury Valley requires a great deal of energy and discipline, and many years of experience. I get better at it every year, and it amuses me to see how I and others struggle with the inner conflict that arises in us inevitably. The conflict is between wanting to do things for people, to impart your knowledge and to pass on your hard earned wisdom, and the realization that the children have to do their learning under their own steam and at their own pace. Their use of us is dictated by their wishes, not ours. We have to be there when asked, not when we decide we should be.

Teaching, inspiring, and giving advice are all natural activities that adults of all cultures and places seem to engage in around children. Without these activities, each generation would have to invent everything anew, from the wheel to the ten commandments, metal working to farming. Man passes his knowledge to the young from generation to generation, at home, in the community, at the workplace – and supposedly at school. Unfortunately, the more today's schools endeavor to give individual students guidance, the more they harm the children. This statement requires explanation, since it seems to contradict what I have just said, namely, that adults always help children learn how to enter the world and become useful in it. What I have learned, very slowly and painfully over the years, is that children make vital decisions for themselves in ways that no adults could have anticipated or even imagined. . . .

So I am teaching myself to do nothing,

and the more I am able to do it, the better is my work. Please don't draw the conclusion that the staff is superfluous. You might say to yourself that the children almost run the school themselves, so why have so many staff, just to sit around and do nothing. The truth is that the school and the students need us. We are there to watch and nurture the school as an institution and the students as individuals.

The process of self direction, or blazing your own way, indeed of living your life rather than passing your time, is natural but not self evident to children growing up in our civilization. To reach that state of mind they need an environment that is like a family, on a larger scale than the nuclear family, but nonetheless supportive and safe. The staff, by being attentive and caring and at the same time not directive and coercive, gives the children the courage and the impetus to listen to their own inner selves. They know that we are competent as any adult to guide them, but our refusal to do so is a pedagogical tool actively used to teach them to listen only to themselves and not to others who, at best, know only half the facts about them.

Our abstaining from telling students what to do is not perceived by them as a lack of something, an emptiness. Rather it is the impetus for them to forge their own way not under our guidance but under our caring and supportive concern. For it takes work and courage to do what they do for and by themselves. It cannot be done in a vacuum of isolation, but thrives in a vital and complex community which the staff sta-



bilizes and perpetuates.

By the end of the first year, having come through the blistering battles of the Summer and Fall, we were seasoned veterans.

We met to discuss year #2, gratified that we, and the school, were still here to talk about it. There was no more money available then than there had been a year earlier.

"We can simply work another year without pay," said one person.

"No," someone pointed out, "the first year it was a marvelous gesture. The second year, it would be like stale ginger-ale."

We knew he was right. There was no merit in getting people used to having free help lying around for the asking. We all believed in the dignity of labor and the principle that people should be paid what they earn.

The dilemma seemed insoluble. It was right that we be paid decent salaries, but there was no money at all to pay us.

The solution came in a moment of inspiration.

We would be hired under contract for a decent salary, but the school, rather than pay it, would owe it. Not as a normal debt – that would rapidly ruin the school's credit rating – but as a conditional debt, one that would come due only if the day came that the school would have a budget surplus.

This was our "salary funding plan." To put it into proper legal wording took an effort that would have warmed the heart of any medieval philosopher. But in practice, the idea is simple: the actual cash disbursement to the staff is what is left over after all other necessities are taken care of. The difference between the cash paid and the contracted salary is a debt to the staff to be paid in the indefinite future.

The second year, full time take home pay was several hundred dollars, for the year. By the fifteenth year, frugal budgeting

made it possible for full time cash disbursements to be \$12,000. It has been rising steadily ever since.

When the accreditation committee of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges first visited Sudbury Valley in 1975, they tried hard to understand what we were doing. The committee's members were all educators from other eminent private schools. Their experience had done little to prepare them for what they saw.

From the beginning, accreditation had been important to us. We wanted not only to succeed in our own right, but to gain the acceptance of the educational world as a "legitimate" enterprise.

We fought hard just to get the Association to look at us. At first, they ignored our formal requests, and wished we would just vanish, as had the other alternative schools. But we persisted, and in the end they had to yield.

One morning I was walking toward the main building with the chairman of the visiting committee. He looked at our beautiful old building and, seeing it with the eyes of an experienced school administrator, asked, "How do you keep this old building in repair? Just that slate roof alone must cost a fortune to keep in good order."

"We are determined," I answered, "to do everything we have to do to keep the school going."

"But where does the money come from?"

"Out of staff salaries," I replied. "The school's needs come first. The staff gets what remains. We are of one mind on this subject."

"That's the difference between us right there," he said, with a touch of wistfulness. "In our school, the staff's needs come first, no matter what. The roof could cave in, the building could collapse – that would be my problem. The kind of commitment to an institution that Sudbury Valley's staff has is

absolutely unique."

The committee was unanimous in recommending our full accreditation.

With all the work, with all the problems of pay, with all the uncertainty, the staff over the years has been remarkably stable and, at the same time, enhanced by new blood.

"Uncertainty?" you may ask; "what uncertainty?"

There is no tenure at Sudbury Valley. The School Meeting hires staff, as part of its duties in running the school. Every year, in the Spring, elections are held for next year's staff. Anyone who wants to serve has to place their names in nomination.

The School Meeting debates the school's staff needs at length, and discusses each candidate in turn. On election day, everyone at school has a chance to vote by secret ballot.

It keeps us all on our toes.

Occasionally, someone is voted out. Often, new applicants are voted in. Old blood and new blood mix well on the staff.

After almost two decades, six of the original dozen are still staff members. One has retired, two were voted out, and three others have gone off to other parts.

We are blessed with a group of varied talents and backgrounds. The staff covers a range that would do credit to a school five times the size. There are Ph.D.'s and high school graduates, artists and intellectuals, professionals and artisans. There are old folks and youngsters, men and women. We have even had several of our graduates return to staff the school.

We are not a group of political, religious, or social comrades today any more than we were in 1968. Our common bond remains what it has always been: a commitment to seeing Sudbury Valley flourish.

## 31

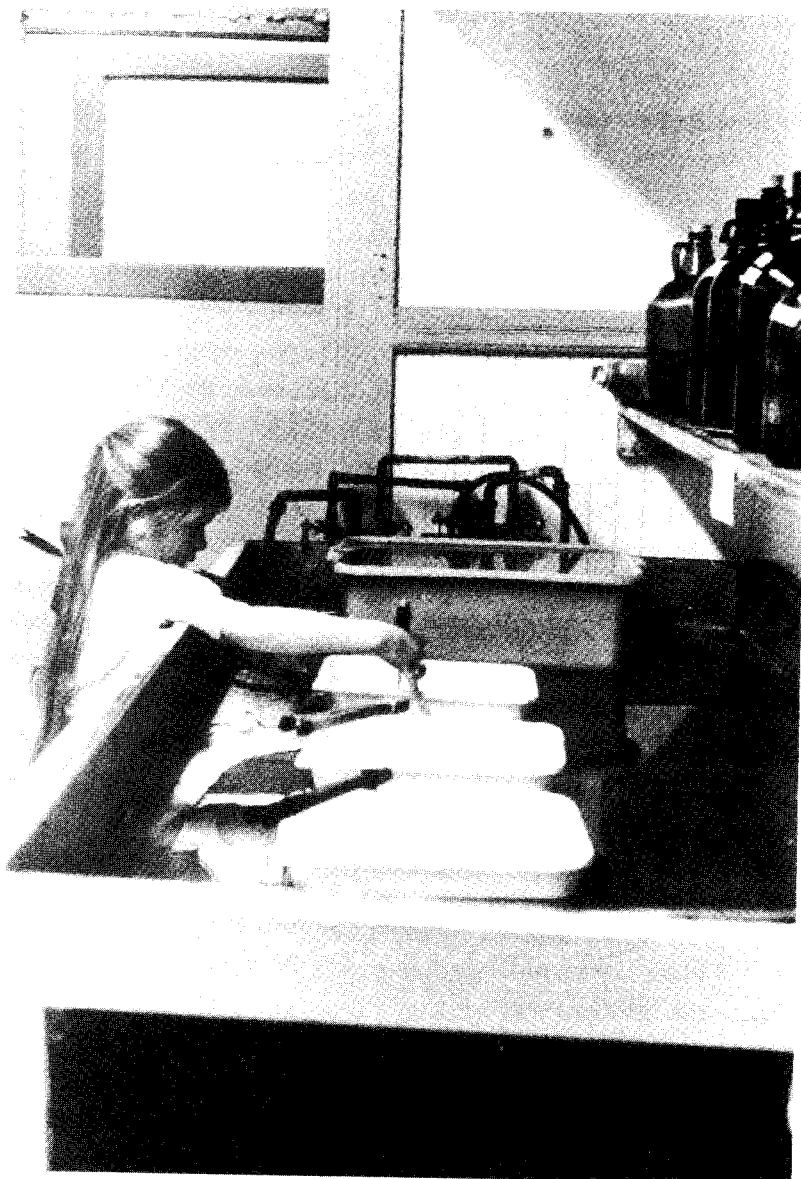
### Little Kids

The office phone rings. Eight year old Debbie answers: "Sudbury Valley School; can I help you?" Momentary silence on the other end. Then the caller, dubious, asks for information about the school. "Just a minute, please," Debbie says. "I'll get someone to assist you." In a moment, she finds a staff member and puts him on the phone. The call is completed. But before one word has been exchanged, the caller has already learned one of the most important things there is to know about us: at Sudbury Valley, all people are created equal, even little people.

Four six year olds are baking cookies in the kitchen with Margaret. Slowly, inexorably, the cookies march on to completion, and the kitchen marches on to chaos.

"Let's get the place cleaned up now," Margaret says, in a determined voice. Her navy experience is certainly not going to waste.

Everyone pitches in. Alice brings a chair to the sink,



stands on it, does the dishes brought to her by Molly. Jacob and Eric are wiping the table and sweeping the floor.

"Get that corner there!" Margaret booms. She is putting away the leftover ingredients. Eric hustles to the dirty corner, Jacob following with a dustpan.

Twenty minutes later, the cookies and the kitchen are finished. Everyone has done their share in the enterprise. No concessions are made to the "frailties" of little kids.

Eight year olds use the electric typewriters side by side with adults – if (as applies to adults too) – they have learned how to use them, and have been certified. Ten year olds use woodworking tools. Nine year olds throw pots. All ages walk to Nobscot pizza, or the State Park, or the golf course pro shop.

For years, under the pervasive influence of prevailing educational gobbledygook, we struggled with the question, "Don't little children need special treatment?" They were full School Meeting members, they had the vote, they were subject to the same rules as everyone else. But weren't they somehow also a little special? Didn't they need some extra care?

The School Meeting spent hours on this question, let it lie for several years, went at it again, let it lie, and again worked it over. But try as we might, we never managed to come up with a way to handle one age differently from another. Our principles didn't condone it, and the realities of life at school didn't support it.

The fact is, though, that every day we confront evidence of the difference between the youngest and oldest students. On the whole, the youngest are far more independent, more resourceful, more imaginative, harder working, busier. Especially if you compare them to older students who first came to our school at a relatively advanced age.

The little ones never have time. They are too busy to talk,

to eat, to sit still. They never walk; they run. They don't tire. Until they get home.

They look adults straight in the eye, talk openly, never flinch or waver. They are courteous, self-assured, and articulate. Older people who come to the school for the first time always have trouble believing what they see.

"You must have skimmed the cream with these students," they say. "They are all so brilliant, so alive." We explain that we have an open admissions policy. Anyone can come. Anyone does come. Generally, they think we are probably fibbing. Kids who behave like this aren't "just anyone."

The nicest thing of all about little kids is what they do for everyone else.

Ponce de Leon spent a lifetime searching for the Fountain of Youth. He needn't have bothered. All he had to do was spend some time with children.

Young children can rejuvenate the most crotchety adult, or bring a smile to the crankiest teenager.

At school, they make the teenagers take notice of their energy and vitality. Not by bothering them, just by existing. After a while, you find new teenagers reading to little kids, working with them, playing with them. The old-timers take this kind of interaction for granted.

One of the most popular children's books ever written is *Winnie-the-Pooh*. In his autobiography, the author, A. A. Milne, tells that he never wrote children's books before or after, but did this for a lark, to see if he could make some extra money. Since he wasn't experienced at writing in a special way for little children, he simply wrote as if his audience were adults who wished to be amused.

The book was an instant success, and remains a timeless best-seller. I still re-read it every few years, as I have since I was

eight years old. It appeals to the child in me, as it appeals to the adult in children.

Sudbury Valley is, I guess, the *Winnie-the-Pooh* of schools, where we treat little kids like adults. And the school environment makes it possible for us over-the-hill grown-ups to recharge the child in us every day.



## 32

### "Good Kids" and "Troublemakers"

The older students are a different story. They come to us in a variety of ways, and they pose a fascinating array of challenges.

Some of them have been with the school all their lives. Others, perhaps a majority, transfer to us from other schools. Generally, the transfers fall into two groups: those who were successful ("A" students) elsewhere but not happy, and those who were at war with their former schools ("troublemakers"). Occasionally, someone is both.

Which of the two types would you prefer? Experience has taught us some strange lessons.

Sam came to Sudbury Valley at sixteen, out of sync with the world. For a year, he sat around in a fog of smoke and inactivity. People who knew him wondered what kind of school

would take him in.

After a while, he settled down within himself and began to figure out his life. By the end of his second year, he had graduated and gone on to college. A succession of adventures, including a stint as a rare gem importer, finally brought him through college and the School of Chiropractic Medicine. He is now a highly successful chiropractor with a booming private practice.

Sam had been bad news at every school prior to Sudbury Valley. With us, even in his first year, he was always sweet-tempered. As the light came back into his eyes, he found all sorts of ways to improve life at school and help other students adjust.

Robert, by age fourteen, was a classic down-and-outer. Alcoholic, always in trouble with the authorities – everyone who knew him predicted a life of misery and an early demise.

He spent four years with us, gradually rebuilding his life. As the years passed, he learned to speak and express himself, sometimes at surprising length. He began to read, to play, to feel better about his prospects. Slowly, he learned to abuse his body less and less, and finally to nurture his health.

By the time he left, Robert had zeroed in on a career of service, specifically in the paramedical field. After much training, he became the head of a paramedic rescue squad. Later, he went to a college of nursing and became a registered nurse.

At school, Robert was always pleasant, always open. Starting out almost catatonically withdrawn, he became sociable and friendly as the years passed. He never made trouble for us.

Year in, year out, they come: the flotsam and jetsam of society, kids on whom just about everyone has given up. Car thieves, mischief-makers, druggies, alcoholics, school-phobists, anti-socials of all sorts, either flung out of all their former schools or violently opposed to attending school at all. All of

them are treated the same at Sudbury Valley. They get their freedom back, and the awesome responsibility of controlling their own destinies. There is no one to hold them down.

Soon, the message sinks in. The freedom, the open atmosphere, the universal friendliness, the age mixing, all combine to ease them back to reality. When the school first opened, the process would take a long time, often a year or two. As the years passed, generation after generation of older teenage students passed the word along, and became instruments of help in absorbing new students. Now, the process of self-discovery starts earlier and goes faster.

Perhaps the most extreme example we ever had was Stella, who by fourteen was such a hellion in her school that the School Committee of her home town voted to pay for her tuition to attend Sudbury Valley, even though this was against state law. They couldn't get rid of her fast enough. Every year a delegation would come up from the town to see whether we were still in existence, and whether she was still attending.

It took a little time, but before long she confronted herself. By the time she was ready to leave, she was on her way to becoming an honors student in college, an M.A. in Psychology, and a prolific writer of fiction.

For us, the Stellas and the Roberts and the Sams are part of a pattern. I remember the very earliest days at school, during a School Meeting, when a bunch of the "A" student types began complaining bitterly about the others, saying they were poor citizens who shouldn't be at the school. "We come to School Meetings, help in every way possible; we are the kind of students you want. The others are misbehaving by lounging around all day and staying away from all civic duties." I remember taking a deep breath, and telling them with some feeling: "Those 'bad guys' know more about the school than you do. They are grappling with their lives, and, right now, that's work enough for

them. You guys are so busy trying to please everyone else that you haven't even started to know yourselves."

The fact is, the "troublemakers" have done marvelously at Sudbury Valley, almost without exception, and always if their parents have supported them. The reason is relatively simple: the very fact of being a troublemaker is a sign that they haven't given up the fight. Try as people might to break these kids, to reform them, to make them fit the common mold, they have kept up a struggle and not given in. They have spunk, moxie. True, their energies are often directed into self-destructive activities; but these same energies, once released from battling an oppressive world, can be swiftly turned to building their own inner world, and even to building a better society. One after another, these students have contributed much to improving the quality of life at school.

Alas, the "A" students have a harder time. They are so used to pleasing their teachers that they are at sea when they first arrive. "Who is there to please?" they wonder. Often they try the staff, whom they see as similar to their former schoolteachers. No dice. The staff here doesn't hand out gold stars. Where to go from there?

It's a painful adjustment. It's not made easier by the discovery that everyone else at school is smart, alert, quick-witted. The struggle to get to the "head of the class" has no meaning at Sudbury Valley, no framework.

These kids, not the "troublemakers," are the real victims of society. After years of conforming to outside authority, they have lost touch with themselves. The spark is gone from their eyes, the laughter from their souls. If they do not destroy, neither do they know how to build. To them, freedom is terrifying. There is no one to tell them what to do.

The "cure" is hard, and takes time. It doesn't always work. Often the best medicine is a heavy dose of boredom. With no

program director to organize their activities, these students often lapse into a state of deep inactivity. Invariably, we tell them that when the boredom becomes intolerable, they will rouse themselves, out of sheer desperation, to create their own framework. It happens, sooner or later, but what a cost these poor "good children" have to pay for their former acquiescence!

The teenagers who have been at Sudbury Valley from the beginning of their school careers don't fall into either group. They are the lucky ones, and you see it immediately on their faces. At home with themselves and with their surroundings, they are able to handle the ups and downs of life without losing sight of their goals.



In a way, we can't win. On the one hand, people look at our students in action and say, "You skim off the cream. No wonder this kind of freedom works for these kids. It would be useless for the average kid." On the other hand, people look at our open admissions and some of the kids we have taken in, and say, "This is a school for 'rejects.' It's just not appropriate for normal kids." The cream, the dross, the average . . .

We can't win, but we usually do. It all comes from treating everyone in the same way, as responsible persons, carrying their own burdens. There is no secret formula, no therapeutic gimmick, no magic technique. Everyone has within themselves the necessary resources to face life. At Sudbury Valley, they are free to discover and use them.

# 33

## Parents

Parents are a nuisance for most schools. They complain, criticize, take up time, and worst of all, they interfere in their children's education.

At Sudbury Valley, parents have been an integral part of the picture from the beginning. We felt that, to succeed, we had to have the full cooperation of the students' families. To begin with, education is the primary responsibility of parents. They bring children into the world, and it is their sacred duty to rear them to the point of independence. Schools exist to help parents in this task, not to exclude them from it. At least that's the way it is supposed to be in this country, where individual freedom is protected.

Then again, children are truly whole persons only if their family life and upbringing is in harmony with their inner being. Intergenerational conflict may be widespread, but so are cancer and heart disease; no one recommends these things as desirable.

There are other considerations. Parents foot the bill for

tuition, and we have a saying that powered the Revolution of 1776: no taxation without representation. They drive their kids to school every day – ours is a commuting day school, no boarders – so we are asking them to make a big daily effort on the school's behalf.

No matter how you cut it, parents belong side by side with us, as our allies and helpmeets. That's how we see it, and that's how we set up the school.

Parents are voting members of The Sudbury Valley School, Inc. (So are students and staff.) I say "members" because the school is a non-profit corporation and therefore has no shareholders; instead, members of the corporation run it.

The membership is called the "Assembly." It meets once a year and sets all major policies. These include the school's tuition rates, and final approval of the School Meeting's proposed budget. Once major policies are set, the School Meeting runs the school on a day-to-day basis all year round.

Parents have more than legal rights at school. They are warmly welcomed to visit when they wish, to help with instruction, and to pitch in with the work. Several times a year the school has gala social events – dinners, picnics, auctions, dances, and the like – in which parents participate along with everyone else.

The close bond with parents sought by the school begins at the admissions interview. For all students under eighteen years of age, we insist that parents come to the interview – both parents if at all possible. From the outset, they are brought into the picture as essential collaborators in the job of providing an education for their offspring.

In fact, gaining the parents' understanding is one of the chief goals of the interviews. Our interview is not primarily a screening or selection device. Instead, we spend the time – often many hours – explaining our philosophy and practice, answer-



ing questions, and laying the groundwork for an ongoing relationship.

Of the twelve original staff, six were parents of children at the school. There have rarely been staff members with children who attended other schools.

Several parents over the years have become so involved with Sudbury Valley that they too eventually ran for election to the staff.

The inclusion of parents in the picture has done much to give a sense of community to the school. Gradually, strangers from the four corners of Eastern Massachusetts get to know each other, recognize common interests, and enjoy each other's presence.

At Sudbury Valley, every day is Family Day. We wouldn't have it any other way.

## 34

### Visitors

Every day is visitor's day too. Or at least so it sometimes seems.

When I set about looking into schools back in the early '60s, I was shocked at the number of schools that made it all but impossible to visit while in session. My shock came from naivete, of course. I had thought educators would be happy to promote outside interest in their work. As is happened, even so-called "free schools" virtually all closed their doors to outsiders.

We were determined to keep Sudbury Valley as open as possible to the community at large. We wanted people to see what we were doing, to argue with us, perhaps eventually to agree with us. We were not interested in being or remaining unique. The more copies and variations of our program that existed, the happier we would be.

For us, visiting was the best form of public relations we could think of. "Seeing is believing," the saying goes. We wanted to create believers.

Now, make no mistake about it: visiting Sudbury Valley is not an easy experience for visitors.

They decide to visit because they have heard something about a school that's "different". And that's what they expect to see.

The trouble is, words don't always mean the same thing to everybody. To us, "school" is Sudbury Valley. To most people, school conveys a whole picture ~ classrooms, desks, kids and teachers sitting in classes, lunchroom, bells, and so forth.

So visitors drive into the Sudbury Valley parking lot and the first thing they see is children all over the place, running around, busy playing.

"We've come during recess," they say.

They walk down to the building and ask for the office. Nine times out of ten, some pint-sized student will greet them amiably and show them to the office.

"Amazing little kid", they say. "Precocious. Must be one of the more exceptional children here."

In the office, there may or may not be an adult. People are streaming in and out. Three ten-year-olds are huddled around a typewriter, producing some little opus.

"Who minds the store?" they think.

Finally, they make contact with the person in charge of visitors that day. It is an adult. Relief. They have some bearings at last.

In fact, it is a little difficult to understand Sudbury Valley in one short visit. Most of us see what we want to, regardless of what's there. When we are in strange surroundings, we translate them into our own frame of reference, and go even farther off the mark. It is all but inevitable.

After an "orientation", such as it is, visitors are let free in the school to poke around for themselves. Common sense and basic courtesy are supposed to govern their interactions with people.

The great majority of visitors are a pleasure to have, however perplexed they seem. Occasionally, someone rude pops in.

"What grade are you in?" Mr. Rude will ask a nine year old.

"No grade."

"What are you studying?"

"Nothing."

"Do you know how to read?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think you ought to be learning social studies?"

Annoyed silence sets in. Who is this guy?

"How do you expect to get into college if you don't study?"

The nine year old doesn't have a ready answer. Mr. Rude begins a lecture. The child breaks off, resumes his activities, wondering who let this jerk into the school.

I have heard variations on this exchange dozens of times. We used to get bent out of shape when they happened. No longer. Anger has been replaced by casual disgust and a shrug of the shoulders.

Some visitors bring a breath of fresh air into the school. They catch on fast, loosen up, and allow themselves actually to enjoy their experience.

Now and then we'll get someone at an admissions interview with whom the following exchange takes place:

"How did you first hear about the school?" we ask.

"Oh, years ago I came as a visitor, one of a class in Education that came to see the school".

"You remembered us all this time?"

"I had the most wonderful time at that visit. The place haunted me. When my child approached school age, I just had to come back."

Other times, people come back to volunteer their services, or even to run for staff.

Serious staff candidates are generally invited to spend more time visiting, if they don't suggest the idea themselves. This calls for an extended visit, lasting a few weeks or even longer.

All visits longer than a day are handled by the School Meeting, which must approve them. Usually, approval is routine. Visitors who stay for a while are treated like members of the school community in most respects. They interact freely, play, teach, pitch in. It doesn't take long for them to get to know us, or for us to know them.

Every new staff member goes through this. Most people wouldn't dream of making the type of commitment it takes to work here without experiencing the school with some intensity.

Then again, occasionally extended visitors are amazingly obtuse. They remind me of the British colonizers who would sit in their fancy suits and gowns having tea in the middle of the tropical African plains. Oblivious, that's what they are.

"I am a good teacher," said one such character. "I will be a great hit with the kids, as I always am." He began an elaborate series of entertainments for the children, duly posted on the bulletin board. He was full of enthusiasm and excitement, the manufactured kind, the kind that's supposed to turn children on. It had been years since any of our students had seen someone like this. For some, it was an entirely new experience. A new species had appeared on campus.

A bunch of kids showed up for the first session. "I'm going to show you a great new game," Mr. Pedagogue said, cheerfully. It was a game designed, of course, to produce an "educational" benefit; in this instance, some arithmetic. A few of us staff members watched with horror, terrified that he would soon be one of our colleagues. "These kids are sure to be taken in by this," we worried. "They just don't know how to deal with it."

A week later, he had left in disgust. He was unappreciat-

ed. It took the kids no time to realize they were being put on. It reminded me of an experience I had long ago with our oldest child. He was three. I thought I might interest him in eating a carrot. I picked one up and started munching on it hungrily, making smacking noises with me tongue and lips. "Yum," I said, "this is really great." "I don't like carrots," he said. That was it.

Kids are a lot smarter than we think.

A lot smarter, in ways, than many of us adults.

At Sudbury Valley, they have a chance to develop a sense of self. Most of our students are not fragile, either emotionally or physically.

So visitors continue to be welcome, and we no longer worry about their effect on our daily lives. The occasional rude ones are asked to leave. Some of the nice ones stay for keeps.

## 35

# With Liberty and Justice for All

Getting a fair shake is hard in any society. In schools, it is often impossible.

I'll never forget the time I was eleven, sitting through an algebra class, bored and fighting sleep. I stretched my arms over my head to wake up. Unfortunately, outside my consciousness, the teacher ~ a gruff martinet ~ had been ranting angrily at the class and had just shouted, "Which one of you guys is a wise-guy?" My upstretched arms seemed to make me a volunteer. Three days' detention followed.

Most of us have had similar experiences. For twelve years of school, I was terrified of the arbitrary authority of the teachers and administrators, from which there was rarely appeal. All of us at school were determined Sudbury Valley would be different.

It is.

When the school first opened, nobody knew how to go about setting up a system that would maintain order fairly. The only school we knew of that seemed to make a successful stab at this problem was A.S. Neill's Summerhill, where they worked out conflicts at their community meetings.

So we tried taking care of things at the School Meeting. The second item on the agenda, after announcements, was the "gripe session," where problems were to be handled.

Predictably, as the weeks wore on, the gripe sessions became longer and longer. Soon, they overshadowed all the other business. We found ourselves holding three and four hour meetings, then two or more meetings a week. Most of the time was devoted to hearing an endless array of complaints about what this student did, or those kids may have done, or that person said he would do.

Worse than the time we lost was our sense of frustration. We tried to be fair, but were we succeeding? Gripe sessions consisted of charges and countercharges, often highly emotional, always picturesque. We rarely had the feeling we were getting to the bottom of things, unless we spent an inordinate amount of time at it. The climax came when the school underwent its baptism by fire in the fall of its opening year. It took a gripe session lasting three solid days to sort things out!

Something had to be done. For some time, we had been looking around for a clue to how to proceed. There was no satisfactory model.

It finally dawned on us that our problem was just the same as any community's problem. And the community had spent thousands of years and immeasurable brain power to devise a solution. Over the centuries, systems of jurisprudence had been developed in different cultures to assure fair-

ness in handling gripes.

We looked hard at our national tradition and studied its essential features. Before long, we assembled the elements of the school's judicial system.

In a nutshell, these elements are simple: there has to be a thorough and impartial investigation of all charges, each of which is specific as to what rule was allegedly broken; there has to be a fair trial before a jury of peers, with full safeguards for the rights of the defendant and with respect for the rules of evidence; and there has to be a fair system of sentencing. Through it all, the personal rights enjoyed by every adult citizen of our nation have to be safeguarded in the school, even though the Supreme Court has held that the United States Constitution does not extend these rights to minors.

The judicial system was set up in the early winter of our first year. It is entirely under the supervision of the School Meeting. There have been changes and adjustments over the years, but the fundamental outlines have remained constant.

The system of justice at Sudbury Valley is our pride and joy. It runs smoothly, handling well over a hundred complaints a year, sometimes ten or twenty a week, without a hitch, year in, year out. Rarely has its fairness been criticized by any member of the school community.

The heart of the system is the group that does the investigating. This is called the Judicial Committee, or "JC" for short. On it serve kids of all ages, a cross-section of the school, drawn by lot, and joined at each meeting by a randomly chosen staff member. It is chaired by a Judicial Clerk elected by the School Meeting four times a year.

The JC meets several times a week. It starts its work with a complaint someone has written, alleging some rule was broken.

Using every avenue open to it, the JC investigates the

complaint. It calls witnesses, sifts the conflicting testimony, until it comes up with its best version of what happened.

Since everyone is part of the process, justice at Sudbury Valley belongs to everyone. This has practical consequences that can be seen every day. People rarely lie deliberately to the JC, even though they may give widely differing versions of what happened. For the most part, everyone cooperates.

Most interesting is the way the kids have learned to differentiate society's needs from personal matters. Everyone knows that the school's functioning as an institution depends on a general acquiescence to the rules passed by the School Meeting. That's the business side of it. That means, for each individual, that they all have to help enforce the laws, to judge fairly and testify truthfully, even if the matter involves a friend. When the official judicial process is over, the personal side takes over. Friendships resume as before, with no interruption.

Over and over again, I have seen close friends clash bitterly in a JC matter, only to emerge from the session and play or work together as if nothing had happened. For new students, especially those transferring from other schools, this is the hardest part of Sudbury Valley to take. They have gotten used to an "us versus them" mentality at school, where anyone who testifies against a fellow student is a "rat." Sometimes, it takes a while for new kids to adjust, but in the end, virtually all of them do. It couldn't be otherwise.

The act of writing a complaint for the JC is called, in school vernacular, "bringing someone up." None of us remembers how this phrase was born, although there are lots of theories. Some think it dates to the days when the JC always met on the second floor, and people were brought upstairs to appear before it.

Not long ago, one five year old said to another, who was new at school, "If you don't stop doing that, I'll bring you up."

"Then I'll come right down," came the ready answer.

The illiterate ones at school have to collar a scribe to write their complaints from dictation, a practice far from extinct in the world at large. Usually, older students help, but the staff is always available for this service.

Occasionally, someone tries to misuse the judicial apparatus for personal ends. They do this by filing a stream of complaints against someone ~ harrassment, it's called. It doesn't take long for the JC to realize what is going on. There can only be two reasons for a student to be "brought up" repeatedly: either the student is being a pile of trouble, or the student is being harrassed. The JC deals firmly with students who harrass their fellows.

At times, kids will file a complaint in the heat of passion when there has been some sort of an argument or high-tension game. By the time the investigation is begun, everyone has cooled down. The matter is then easily mediated by the JC, or even dismissed. Often, the cooling-off takes place before the complaint has been completed, as it's being written. I recorded one such session recently, one that was not at all atypical:

### "WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG..."

#### A True Story

"Will you help us write a complaint?"

I was startled from a mid-day reverie as I sat on the couch outside the office. Standing over me, peering at me somewhat hesitantly, were Avery (age 9) and Sharon (7). "Maybe we should find Marge."

I looked at them for a moment. "What for?" I asked. "Skip (13) and Michael (8) were disrupting our activities in the quiet room," came

the answer. Idly wondering whether I, in turn, should file a complaint against them for their activities in the quiet room, I answered, "Sure," and we marched into the empty office.

It was 1:30. Virtually all the staff was closeted in the newly refurbished stereo room, where they had been meeting with interested students since 11:00 to decide the future use of the room. My task at hand seemed trivial in comparison. Neverthe-less, I sat at the office desk, pen in hand, looking as official as I could. Avery stood close by my right, Sharon leaned over the edge of the desk to my left, both watching every move I made, every word I wrote. This was to be a serious enterprise.

Complaint form before me, I turned to Avery and said, "Start at the beginning. The very beginning."

"I probably shouldn't have called them names," said Avery, a bit worried. "That was probably wrong."

"Start from the beginning. What happened?"

"Jim (8) and I were playing in the barn alone. Skip and Michael came in and started teasing Dennis (12)."

"Dennis was there too?" I asked.

"He came in. Then they came. I called them names to protect Dennis. I did it to help him."

Wondering why Dennis needed Avery's protection, I asked him to go on with the story.

"Then they chased us. Skip took my hat, and we ran out of the barn. Daniel (7), Jim and

I escaped."

"Daniel was there too?" I asked, rewriting the story yet another time.

"Dennis, Michael and Skip chased us. I got away, grabbed my hat, then Skip picked me up, dragged me back to the barn, but we all escaped ~."

"Just a minute," I interrupted, sensing that I was losing any semblance of understanding of what had taken place. "Why was Dennis chasing you too, if you were protecting him?"

"I don't know," answered Avery with a smile. By now the words were spilling out in an excited recitation. His eyes were glistening. There was no stopping him.

"Then we tried to run to the main building and they trapped Jim in the sports closet and Daniel ran and told me and I went to rescue Jim. I made believe I was helping them lock him in but I didn't really and he escaped and I was in but I got out ~."

At this moment a happy and calm Jim walked into the office and stood by Sharon. He certainly didn't look to me like someone who had just endured a harrowing experience.

Avery was really into it. I turned to him and asked, "Did you have a good time?" He laughed heartily. "Yes," he said. "How about you?" I asked Jim. "Yes. I don't want to write a complaint."

"But they disrupted out activity," Avery protested.

"What activity?" I asked.

"The magic show."

I hadn't heard of any magic shows that day. Knowing I was letting myself in for it, I said innocently, "What magic show?"

"Sharon and Cindy's (7)," answered Avery.

A cheerful Daniel had joined us by now. Sharon, who had been silently watchful throughout, perked up at the mention of her name. "We tried to kick them out of the room, but they wouldn't go," she said with excitement, "then we pushed them." "And I tried to get them to go," chimed in Avery. Daniel was smiling. Jim was somber.

"Can I tear up the complaint?" Jim said.

Sharon grinned. Daniel smiled. I asked Avery, "What would happen if the complaint remained?"

"They would stop doing it," he answered with a great show of confidence in the effectiveness of the school's judicial system.

"Do you want them to stop?" I asked.

"No," he answered with a hearty laugh.

Jim tore up the complaint. General satisfaction. Then Avery turned to me as he was preparing to leave and, with a broad smile, asked me, "When you were young, did you have such adventures?"

Since the judicial system was established, only one student has been expelled by the School Meeting for bad behavior. No statistics could speak more eloquently to the success of the system. The fact is, everyone gets a fair shake at Sudbury Valley. No one is afraid of authority, no one has to fear adults, or teachers, or anyone else. People look each other straight in the eye, as equal members of the school community. Everyone rests con-

fidant in the knowledge that freedom here is protected by a system of justice that is blind to age, sex, or status. Nothing makes me prouder of being associated with the school.

## 36

### The Heart of the Matter

When all is said and done, when all the words are read and the pictures studied, the question still remains: What is Sudbury Valley really like? How does it feel? What really goes on?

At first glance, a lot of things strike even the most casual observer. There are children all over the place. That's the impression of "perpetual recess" we so often hear about. The kids are free, active, noisy, vivacious.

The setting reenforces these impressions. The school is on the grounds of an old estate, built at the close of the Civil War. Much of the building is still the original construction. The walls are granite, quarried in the local Framingham quarry on Salem End Road, long since defunct. Granite buildings are rare in these parts, and the effect is one of unusual solidity ~ an effect that reaches deeply into the spirit of the school.

The lawns, the trees, the bushes, the wildflowers, the pond, dam, and mill house, the barn and stables ~ all contribute



to an aura of rustic beauty. Framingham is, after all, a bustling town, brimming with heavy industry, commerce, huge shopping malls, housing projects, highways and turnpikes ~ all the appurtenances of urban and suburban life. This reality hovers over the school, surrounds it; but the school itself is nestled in a corner of town carefully preserved for the enjoyment of natural beauty. A State Park is adjacent to the campus, as is a large tract of conservation land held in perpetual trust; these add to the school's inherent natural beauty.



We are not, however, in an English castle or Newport mansion. Ours is not the milieu of great ostentatious wealth, carefully preserved to perpetuate the elegance of an upper crust. Nathaniel Bowditch, the famed Massachusetts sailor whose tables and manuals still form a part of sailing lore, was a man of the everyday world. His estate was a working farm, not a gentleman's retreat. The place has aged well, but it has aged like a common workman, not like a Prince of the Blood. There are the inevitable signs of wear and tear: cracks in the walls and ceil-

ings, weatherbeaten slates ~ not items that yield to good maintenance, just as the wrinkled skin of age does not yield to creams and salves. The building has aged with dignity, but it has aged nonetheless, and an atmosphere of use, of real people living in the real world, pervades it.

Enhancing the effect are the furnishings, all basic and home-like: tables, chairs, couches, armchairs, just what you expect in a home. And it's all lived-in, very much so, having been bought or received second-hand, once again showing the signs of human use. As a result of all this, the physical surrounding arouses in those of us who spend our time at school two distinct and mutually complementary emotions: ease, because we are relaxed about using our surroundings, which suffer to be handled like the everyday artifacts of life that they are; and care, because we see that our continued enjoyment of them depends on how considerately we treat them.

Ease and care, hallmarks of Sudbury Valley. People are comfortable here, not sullen or tense or anxious. Brows are smooth, not knit, eyes are clear, not clouded. People rarely avert their gaze. And everyone cares. They care about others ~ their friends, their fellow students, staff, parents, visitors. No matter who is involved, in a pinch everyone is there to help. They care about the school, about keeping it alive and functioning, about helping it meet their needs.

No one who comes to the school can miss these feelings. They are everywhere, and they strike you at once.

Over everything hangs the mood of time suspended. People scurry about, with the haste of involvement, but no one rushes. There are few clocks, no reminders of the passing hours.

People come and go as they wish, early or late. If they want to come when no one is around, they get a key to the

school, a key to the treasure that this place has become to them. No one stops to wonder at the trust that each key conveys.

Trust, too, is everywhere, and is everywhere to be seen. Belongings lie unguarded, doors unlocked, equipment unprotected and available to all. What a crazy place this is, our Sudbury Valley! Open admissions ~ everyone can attend. And by walking across the threshold, become in an instant part of the warmth and trust that is the school.

In many ways, the school is a community, despite the fact that it is not a boarding school, nor the product of a close-knit group. Its far flung members arrive as strangers. They stay as friends. Slowly, in their own good time, with no prodding or encouragement from us, parents get to know each other and friendships are formed. The children seek each other out beyond the school, forging the bonds that will last many of them a lifetime.

The school is much like a village ~ the village of the past and of the future. The ties are formed freely, everyone is mobile, but the roots are deep, to nurture as long as we live. Graduates return five, ten, fifteen years later, always at home, always to a warm greeting. They expect to remain part of us, and we expect them to. There is nothing awkward or strange about it.

Past, present, and future melt together in the collective consciousness of the school's denizens. Children hear stories of exploits long past, and one day the hero pays a visit, and walks into their hearts. "You're so-and-so, about whom Marge told us so many stories?" They sit together, trade memories of the past for tales of the present, then depart, moving freely in the natural flow.

Yet, nothing of essence has to change for a person to become part of the school. No loyalty is demanded, no con-

formity is asked for, no surrender of private dreams to public necessities. Sudbury Valley is living proof that free people, freely associating, given a chance to realize their personal goals with the support and respect of their colleagues, will form bonds and loyalties and friendships as strong as any man has known. The recipe is simple: one part freedom, one part dignity, one part responsibility, one part support, mix together and let sit until ready. Any chef can copy it with the same success.

Can you feel the school better now?

## Afterword

### The Proof of the Pudding

For everyone, the time eventually comes when they leave Sudbury Valley and go out into the world on their own. What happens to them later on in life offers a clue to the effectiveness of their schooling.

Many students want to have in hand a high school diploma when they finally depart. It took us over a year after we opened to figure out how to award a diploma.

We couldn't base a diploma on the usual criteria: grades, courses, credits, years of successful coursework. These kinds of "achievements" were not asked for here; neither the school nor the students attached particular value to any specific set of them.

The very idea of a diploma seemed to contradict our ideals. A diploma is an official certification by the school: isn't that some form of evaluation, the very thing we avoid?

We finally lit upon a satisfactory solution. The central

idea was simple: our chief goal is to send out to the world students who are able to cope responsibly with the challenges of life in a free society. For a diploma, we institutionalized this goal.

Students seeking a formal certificate of graduation get up before the school community and defend the thesis that they are ready to become responsible citizens of the community at large. They must make a presentation that is sensible and convincing to their peers and colleagues. How they do it is up to them; they can seek whatever help they want in formulating their ideas.

Once they have made their presentation, they are open to challenges from the floor of the meeting called to hear them. These discussions can be spirited. When the session is over, if the students still believe their presentation is valid, they apply for a diploma.

The school must vote its approval. Is this some sort of evaluation? Indeed it is. It is one the student has asked for explicitly, and lies in an area that we are willing to handle.

The diploma procedure is tough. After the first few, many staff members said to each other, "I'm glad I don't have to go through that." Some students have presented themselves with this challenge as young as sixteen, but for the most part it is seventeen and eighteen year olds who try it. In all the years, only one person tried to bluff his way through. The school didn't swallow it, and he left without a diploma. Ten years later he thanked us for not letting him succeed in trying to fool himself.

Many students go out into the world without a diploma. To us, it hardly makes a difference. What counts is the inner resources they have garnered from their time at school to prepare them for meaningful lives.

By now, of course, the school has a track record with its former students.

Many have gone on to colleges and other advanced training. Not one student who wanted to attend college has ever

been unsuccessful; most get into their college of first choice. As we thought would happen, their unorthodox schooling has been more of an asset than a liability as far as college admissions officers are concerned. This is true whether or not the students had a diploma.

Others have gone into vocations directly from school. They have ended up in all sorts of pursuits: executives, auto mechanics, musicians, artisans, salespeople, technicians, designers, to name a few. The ones who have sought additional schooling also have gone into a wide variety of professions. Nothing surprises us.

It is a satisfying feeling to call on a graduate whose specialty is landscaping to come and work at our homes or at the school. Or to make an appointment for treatment with a graduate who is a Chiropractor. Perhaps one of these days even the mortician's services will be needed by one of us.

One typical aspect of the school's legacy is the general absence of arrogance among former students as they go through life. The school has always been careful to avoid any impression of a hierarchy of activities. There are no "tracks" here, no one to say that college prep is the best of all, that business training is a step below, that vocational training is for dummies. Everything about the school conveys our belief that any human interest is a worthwhile pursuit if only it has been chosen freely and followed from true inner desire. Our distinctions are between superficial interests and deep ones, not between "worthy" ones and "unworthy" ones.

As a result of this, at school everyone lives together harmoniously regardless of what they are doing. And this attitude follows our students through life, keeping them comfortable with others, regardless of what paths they have chosen.

There have been studies made of our former students, and

there will be more as the years pass. They show our alumni to be, on the whole, independent, integrated people with a sense of self that gives them purpose in life.

But the common thread that binds them all is the realization that their years of growth were not taken away from them. At Sudbury Valley, they kept their childhood as long as they wished, weaving it into the marvelous patterns that only children can create. Our greatest gift to them was to let them be. By not robbing them of what was truly their own, we did more for each one than an army of more "helpful" people could ever have done.

For the grownups who spent their youth with us, this is our legacy.

## NOTE

To protect the privacy of the individuals concerned, all names of students at Sudbury Valley mentioned in this book have been changed.

## About Banyan Tree :

Banyan Tree publish & distribute books that bind together the relationship of living and non living. Our books challenges the pre defined notions of institutionalized world, understanding the power of our traditional & cultural roots like the roots of BANYAN TREE.

Here you will find books that challenges the institutalisation of knowledge, culture & traditions, books that challenges the control & adulteration of food, health & farming, books on learning, un-schooling, sustainable development & ecology. We strongly believe that '*nothing can be taught*' and '*work is teacher*'. Here you can buy books in English, Hindi and other Indian languages.

We also support individuals who want to traverse their own path in the field of alternative media, community learning, and sustainable development. Those who are interested can write to us.

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## प्रकाशित / शीघ्र प्रकाश्य पुस्तकों की सूची List of Books Published / Forthcoming

लड़ाई से लगाव - अमरीका युद्ध छोड़ने में क्यों असमर्थ है  
ज़ोल आंद्रेज़

**DISCIPLINED MINDS** - A Critical Look At Salaried Professionals And The Soul-Battering System That Shapes Their Lives  
Jeff Schmidt

अनुशासित मस्तिष्क - वेतनभोगी पेशेवर के जीवन को आकार देने वाली आत्मा-विनाशी व्यवस्था पर एक विवेचनात्मक दृष्टि  
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**DUMBING US DOWN** - The Hidden Curriculum Of Compulsory Schooling  
John Taylor Gatto

मूढ़ बनाने का कारखाना - स्कूली शिक्षा का छद्म पाठ्यक्रम  
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**THE ART OF THE COMMONPLACE** - The Agrarian Essays Of Wendell Berry  
Wendell Berry

**WEAPONS OF MASS INSTRUCTION** - A Schoolteacher's Journey Through The Dark World Of Compulsory Schooling  
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थोक में गुलाम बनाने का हथियार - अनिवार्य शिक्षा की धिनौनी दुनिया के भीतर एक स्कूली शिक्षक की यात्रा  
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HEALTH and LIGHT - The Extraordinary Study That Shows How Light Affects Your  
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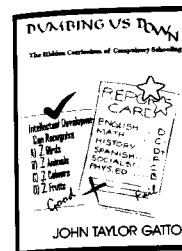
प्रकाश कैसे आपके स्वास्थ्य और भावनात्मक कुशलक्षेम को प्रभावित करता है पर एक असाधारण अध्ययन  
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हेलेना होज़-नोर्बर्ग

एक तिनके से क्रान्ति  
मासानोबु फुकुओका

Slam Dunking Walmart  
Al Norman

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## DUMBING US DOWN

### The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling

JOHN TAYLOR GATTO

हिन्दी में “मूढ़ बनाने का कारखाना - स्कूली शिक्षा का छद्म पाठ्यक्रम”

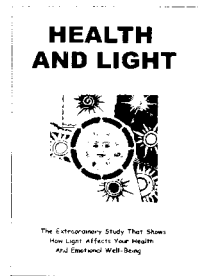
Gatto comes down hard on the industrial one-size-fits-all schooling model. He argues that not only are schools irrelevant to the lives of children, they are in fact damaging. His central thesis is that factory schooling is causing great harm to children and communities. It is an anti-learning, anti-social, anti-democratic activity.

Manish Jain, *Shikshantar Andolan*

Continuous ringing of the bells, from one compartment to another compartment, every day eight hours of confinement, the age-segregation like vegetables, the lack of privacy and constant surveillance, the crazy sequences, cut-off from the working community and all the rest of the curriculum of schooling are designed exactly as if someone had set out to prevent children from learning – how to think and act – to coax them into addiction and dependent behavior.

After teaching for years, John Taylor Gatto reached to the sad conclusion that schooling has nothing to do with learning – but to teach young people to conform to the economic and social order. *Dumbing Us Down* reveals shocking reality to today's school system and has become a beacon for parents seeking alternatives to it.

JOHN TAYLOR GATTO has taught for over 30 years in Government Public Schools and is recipient of the New York City Teacher of the Year Award and New York State Teacher of the Year. He is much sought after speaker on Education. Recently he has started Bartleby Project to peacefully refuse to take standardized tests or to participate in any preparation of these tests by simply writing “*I would prefer not to take your test.*” His other books are *A Different Kind of Teacher*, *The Underground History of American Education* and *Weapons of Mass Instruction* (Banyan Tree).



## HEALTH AND LIGHT

The Extraordinary Study That Shows How Light Affects Your Health And Emotional Well Being

JOHN OTT

हिन्दी में “स्वास्थ्य और प्रकाश - कैसे प्रकाश हमारे स्वास्थ्य एवं मानसिक कुशलसेम को प्रभावित करता है पर एक असाधारण अध्ययन

The right kind of light can add years to your life.

The wrong kind can make you ill –  
perhaps even kill you.

What do you know about light –  
and the role it plays in our physical and  
emotional well-being?

Do you know that hyperactive children  
may simply be spending too much  
time indoors under the wrong kind  
of artificial lighting?

Do you know that some forms of  
arthritis may be the result of exactly  
The same condition in adults?

Do you know that wearing pink-tinted  
glasses might lead to serious health problems?

Do you know that the right kind of sunlight  
actually cures skin cancer?

This is the book that tells you what you need  
to know – about health and light!



## अनुशासित मस्तिष्क

वेतनभोगी पेशेवर तथा उसके जीवन को आकार देने वाली  
आत्मा विनाशी व्यवस्था पर एक विवेचनात्मक दृष्टि

जेफ शिमिट्

In English

### DISCIPLINED MINDS

A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and  
the Soul-Battering System that Shapes their Lives

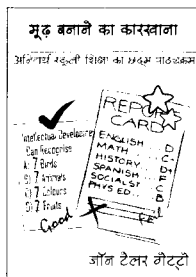
JEFF SCHMIDT

भारत एवं विश्वभर में, काम अधिकाधिक राजनैतिक होता जा रहा है।  
वेतनभोगी पेशेवरों की संख्या लगातार बढ़ रही है, क्योंकि कामों के लिये  
ऐसे कर्मचारियों की आवश्यकता होती है, जो शक्तिशाली हितों का ध्यान  
रखें और जो अपनी किसी भी सामाजिक द्रष्टि को उनके हक में गौण कर दें।  
पेशेवर नौकरियों के लिये प्रतिस्पर्धा तीव्र हो गई है, जिसने शिक्षा को ऊँचे  
दाँव वाला खेल बना दिया है। इसलिये लोग ऐसा प्रमाण पत्र चाहते हैं जिसकी  
कापिरिट दुनिया में मांग हो। आज हर चरण पर भय की छाया मंडराती रहती है  
क्योंकि स्कूलों में दाखिले के लिये जबर्दस्त प्रतिस्पर्धा है, और स्नातक हो  
जाने के पश्चात् भी नौकरी की निरंतरता, मालिक की इच्छा पर निर्भर करती  
है। जीवित रहने के लिये, कई लोगों ने निगमित प्रवृत्तियों व मूल्यों को,  
बेहतर दुनिया के लिये काम करने के अपने संकल्प से अलग रखते हुए अपना  
लिया है।

परन्तु बासेज़ को हमेशा वह नहीं मिल पाता है जैसा वे चाहते हैं। इसे समझ  
लेने पर कि कार्य मूलतः राजनैतिक क्रिया है, आप शिक्षा और नौकरी की  
गड़ड़-मड़ड़ को आराम से पार कर सकते हैं जो कि स्वयं आपकी पहचान की  
ही लड़ाइयाँ हैं। आप अपनी नैतिक निष्ठा और मूल्यों को बरकरार रखते हुए  
भी, अपने उद्देश्यों का अनुगमन कर सकते हैं, न केवल अपने निजी सुख के  
लिये, अपितु समाज के लिये भी। यह पुस्तक बताती है कि कैसे आप ऐसा  
कर सकते हैं।

आप क्या बनेंगे? यही यक्ष प्रश्न है। *अनुशासित मस्तिष्क* आपको लड़ने के  
लिये तैयार करती है, ताकि आप स्वतंत्र चिंतन कर सकें और आज के  
नैगमिक समाज में अपनी द्रष्टि के अनुसार कार्य कर सकें।

जेफ शिमिट् उन्नीस वर्षों तक *फिजिक्स टुडे* पत्रिका के संपादक रहे जब तक कि उन्हें इस परिवर्तनवादी  
पुस्तक लिखने के लिये नौकरी से निकाल न दिया गया। उन्होंने कैलीफोर्निया विश्वविद्यालय  
से भौतिकी में पीएचडी की और अमरीका, सेंट्रल अमरीका और अफ्रीका में पढ़ाया। वे लास एंजल्स में  
पैदा हुए, पले-बढ़े और वर्तमान में वाशिंगटन डी.सी. में रहते हैं। आप [jeffschmidt@alumi.uci.edu](mailto:jeffschmidt@alumi.uci.edu) पर  
उन्हें लिख सकते हैं।



## भूढ़ बनाने का कारस्वाना

अनिवार्य स्कूली शिक्षा का छद्म पाठ्यक्रम

जॉन टेलर गेट्टो

In English

### DUMBING US DOWN

The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling

JOHN TAYLOR GATTO

लगातार बजने वाली घंटियाँ, एक कक्ष से दूसरे कक्ष में, प्रतिदिन आठ घंटे की कैद, आयु के अनुसार सब्जी-भाजियों की तरह विभाजन, निजता की कमी और निरंतर निगरानी, क्रियाशील समुदाय से पूरी तरह काटकर तथा स्कूल के बाकि सभी पाठ्यक्रमों की रचना इस प्रकार की गई है कि हमारे बच्चों को यह न सीखने दिया जाये कि वे किस तरह सोच समझकर कार्य करें – वे हमेशा दूसरों पर निर्भर बने रहें।

तीस वर्ष तक सरकारी स्कूल में पढ़ाने और लगातार पुरस्कार जीतने के बाद जॉन टेलर गेट्टो इस दुःखद निर्णय पर पहुँचे कि स्कूलिंग का शिक्षा में कोई वास्ता नहीं है – बहुत ही थोड़ा सा – बल्कि युवाओं को यह सीखाना कि कैसे आर्थिक और सामाजिक प्रणाली की चाकरी की जाये। *डंबिंग अस डाउन* वर्तमान स्कूली शिक्षा प्रणाली की कई भयानक वास्तविकताओं को उजागर करती है और उन अभिभावकों के लिए एक पथ-प्रदर्शक बन गई है जो “दूसरा और सही रास्ता” तलाशना चाहते हैं। यह पुस्तक भारतीय संदर्भ में भी उतनी ही प्रासंगिक है और हमें यह सोचने को बाध्य करती है कि हम कैसे हमारे बच्चों को शिक्षित करें – और किसके लिए।

जॉन टेलर गेट्टो ने न्यूयार्क सिटी पब्लिक स्कूल में तीस वर्षों तक पढ़ाया है। उन्हें इस दौरान न्यू यार्क सिटी टीचर अवार्ड और न्यू यार्क स्टेट टीचर अवार्ड से भी पुरस्कृत किया गया था। शिक्षा में नई सोच को लेकर वे काफी लोकप्रिय वक्ता हैं और अपने व्याख्यानों के लिए उन्होंने पुरे उत्तर अमरीका में करीब 15 लाख मील की लंबी यात्राएँ की हैं। उनकी प्रलयकारी पुस्तक “*डंबिंग अस डाउन*” की अंग्रेजी में अब तक दो लाख से भी ज्यादा प्रतियाँ छप चुकी हैं। हाल ही में सत्याग्रह की भावना से उन्होंने मानकीकृत परीक्षा को तोड़ने और शिक्षा प्रणाली से असहयोग करने के लिए एक आंदोलन की शुरुआत की है – परीक्षा पुस्तकों में यह लिखना कि “मैं आपका टेस्ट नहीं लेना पसंद करूँगा।” उनकी अन्य पुस्तकें हैं, *ए डिफरेंट काइण्ड ऑफ टीचर*, *द अण्डरग्राउंड हिस्ट्री ऑफ अमेरिकन एजुकेशन* और *विपन्स ऑफ मास इन्स्ट्रक्शन*।

## प्राचीनता का भविष्य : लदाख से सीख

हेलेना होज़ नार्बर्ग

लदाख में मैंने ऐसे समाज को जाना है, जिसमें न तो कोई वस्तु व्यर्थ है और न ही कोई प्रदुषण है, एक समाज जिसमें अपराध के लिये कोई गुंजाइश नहीं है, समुदाय स्वस्थ और सुदृढ़ हैं, और युवा पुत्र को इससे कोई शर्म नहीं आती कि वह अपनी माता अथवा दादी के प्रति सौम्य व स्नेही हो। जब आधुनिकीकरण के दबाव के चलते समाज का टूटना आरंभ हो जाता है, तब उसके सबक लदाख ही नहीं उसके बाहर भी प्रासंगिक हो जाते हैं।

यह मूर्खतापूर्ण लग सकता है कि कोई तिब्बती पठार की “आदिम” संस्कृति, हमारे औद्योगिक समाज को कुछ सिखा सकती है। परंतु हमें एक आधाररेखा चाहिये, जिससे कि हम अपनी जटिल संस्कृति को बेहतर ढंग से पहचान सकें। लदाख में मैंने देखा है कि प्रगति ने लोगों को धरती से अलग कर दिया है, एक-दूसरे से अलग और अंततः स्वयं अपने से अलग। मैंने सुखी लोगों को अपनी प्रशान्ति को खोते देखा, जब उन्होंने हमारे मानदंडों के अनुसार रहना शुरू किया। इसके फलस्वरूप, मुझे इस नतीजे पर पहुँचना पड़ा कि व्यक्ति को बनाने में संस्कृति की भूमिका उससे कहीं अधिक होती है, जितना मैं पहले सोचती थी।

हमारे लिये इस बात की तात्कालिक आवश्यकता है कि हम बचा कर रखने वाले संतुलन की ओर बढ़ें - एक संस्कृति व प्रकृति के बीच। लदाख हमें वह रास्ता दिखलाने में सहायक हो सकता है, आपस में संबंधित बलों की गहन समझ को देकर, जो हमारे समाज को गढ़ रहे हैं। यह व्यापक दृष्टिकोण, मैं समझती हूँ, एक आवश्यक कदम है, यह सीखने के लिये कि हम स्वयं को और अपने ग्रह को किस प्रकार उपचार करें।



## स्वास्थ्य और प्रकाश

प्रकाश कैसे आपके स्वास्थ्य और भावनात्मक कुशलक्षेम को प्रभावित करता है पर एक असाधारण अध्ययन

### जॉन नेश ऑट

मनुष्य इस धरती पर कम से कम 1,00,000 पीढ़ियों से निवास करता आया है, और प्रकाश के लिये वह लगभग सदैव सूर्य पर आश्रित रहा है - जब तक कि करीब पांच पीढ़ी पूर्व एडीसन से इन्केन्डीसेंट लैम्प का अविष्कार नहीं किया। शोध ने अब यह प्रमाणित कर दिया है कि दिन के प्रकाश का संपूर्ण विस्तार मनुष्य की अंतः स्नावी प्रणाली को उचित रीति से उत्प्रेरित करने हेतु महत्वपूर्ण है और जब उसे अपना अधिकांश समय कृत्रिम प्रकाश के स्रोतों के तहत व्यतीत करना पड़ता है, तब वह उसके अप्रत्यक्ष प्रभाव से पीड़ित होता है क्योंकि वे दिन के प्रकाश का केवल सीमित भाग ही पुनर् उत्पादित करता है। अतः दस वर्ष पूर्व ही ऑट ने समझ लिया कि कृत्रिम प्रकाश के स्रोत की बनावट में परिवर्तन करना होगा ताकि उसका विश्लेषण अधिक व्यापक हो सके।

जैसे-जैसे मनुष्य का अधिकाधिक औद्योगिक होता गया, कृत्रिम प्रकाश के वातावरण में काँच की खिड़की व कार के शीशे के पीछे रहते हुए, टी.वी देखते हुए, रंगीन धूप के चश्मों के माध्यम से देखते हुए, खिड़की विहीन भवनों में काम करते हुए, आँखों में प्रविष्ट होने वाली तरंगआयामी ऊर्जा, प्राकृतिक सूर्य के प्रकाश की तुलना में अत्यधिक विकृत हो गई है।

तीव्र गति से विकसित हो रहे, प्रकाश ऊर्जा के तरंगआयामों के ज्ञान की जबर्जस्त अहमियत के कारण अंततः अनेक बड़े निगमों को प्रोत्साहित किया है, और वे अपने उत्पादों को इस प्रकार डिजाइन करने लगे हैं कि प्राकृतिक प्रकाश का पूरा स्पेक्ट्रम आँखों में प्रवेश कर हो सके। हालाँकि इस महत्वपूर्ण जानकारी के बारे में अभी तक बहुत ही कम मालुम है कि घर के अंदर प्राकृतिक प्रकाश का वातावरण किस प्रकार सृजित किया जा सके जहाँ इतने अधिक लोग अपने समय का बड़ा भाग व्यतीत करते हैं। हम इन्वायरनमेंटल हेल्थ एंड लाइट रिसर्च इन्स्टिट्यूट में यह आशा करते हैं कि यह किताब उस लक्ष्य की ओर बढ़ने के नए रास्ते उपलब्ध करने में सहायक होगी, और साथ ही उन क्षेत्रों की अनेक चुटियों, बीमारियों के उपचार का मार्ग ढूँढ़ेगी जो मानव जाति को संतुष्ट की हुई हैं।